


THE
GRIP OF
GOLD

BY 
ROBERT
HALIFAX



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The Drums of Fate

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ROBERT HALIFAX

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THE GRIP OF GOLD

CHAPTER I

"THERE!—there it is! It's a woman—it's *her*!"

The crowd surged forward yet another foot nearer the great iron gates that parted it from the living mystery. Then all was deathly still; breathing and heart-beats seemed to be suspended; eyes strained to see through that blue-black twilight of the cypress avenue. Nothing—nothing—yes! There, only a few paces down, as if it had risen from the solid earth, stood a woman's figure. With one long white hand she held together the ends of a fleecy white wrapper flung around her dark head; the other shaded her eyes, as she looked back at them. Never moving, she stood like a woman waiting for something to which no one else in all Felcote could give a name. They might almost feel, without seeing, the fathomless, far-away smile of contempt in her eyes eat into them. They were edging silently back, awed by the frozen stillness of one woman. And then, as if a crowd of Felcote people were no more to her than a flock of sheep, she had turned slowly back, the swish of her nurse's grey robe dying down the leaf-strewn path. Just too late the spell was broken; a husky voice came from the back of the crowd.

"She's no woman. She's a witch!—a witch

in angel's uniform. I'd tell her so to her face, if it weren't for Miss Sheba! Does a woman turn the key in the door of a dying man's room, and keep it turned? She's done that to keep Miss Sheba out. There's money. Where there's money, there's always a devil in the background. That's me—Anthony Lee!”

And a deep-throated growl rose and died. Then, the thick silence of suspense again. They could do nothing—nothing but stare on through the blue haze for some fresh sign from the house of mystery. It could not be long now ere Doctor Lancing's Panhard car came whizzing round the road-bend. His face, even in that light, would decide the supreme question of all—life or death for the man who lay in that northern corridor.

Away in the distance lay the dome of amber gaslight over Barrowdene town, and beyond it the iron foundry furnaces that never slept sent up a crimson trail of smoke and flame. Here, the scent of hay and sweetbrier came through the stark stillness of summer evening; and here, unseen but felt, the wan figure of Tragedy seemed to stand waiting and listening.

Old Spartan Loder was dying. Dying! The word had flashed from incredulous lip to lip. It had drawn a fascinated crowd. The fate of all Felcote seemed to hang in the balances. What would happen—what *could* happen?

Wealth had brought no happiness to the master of the Manor House at Felcote. It had frozen him—withered him. He had cursed London and its whirl; he had curled his thin lip when Barrowdene sent a deputation to beg him to voice their

interests in Parliament. That sardonic hatred of women, believed to thrill in every fibre of his lean body, had of late years seemed to expand into a horror of all humanity. He had practically buried himself here, till a wall of mystery had grown up around the old house. Merely to hear the tap-tap of his stick on the gravel walks had been something to talk of for days; to catch a fugitive glimpse of the man himself, with the furrows of that great secret sunk as deep in his hard face as though scored with a chisel, was something to haunt one's dreams. Spartan Loder at times carried a gun, and was said to have fired more than once at a shadow or a rustling bush.

Money—vast hoards of it—was hidden away in unknown corners of these same grounds, all Felcote believed. He had trusted no bank; no letters reached him; but his housekeeper could always pay in hard coin. Rumours had reached Felcote that the silent man could walk upon a pathway of his own gold, if he chose. And at this crucial moment the only known heir to it all was wandering the world, unconsciously evading all the lawyers' strenuous efforts to trace him. The thrilling irony of it!

Dying! The word had a new, eerie note in it to-night. To pass silently away from the place as he had lived—with his life's mystery unrevealed—impossible! For not even Miss Sheba, his ward, who drove through Felcote every day with that same faint, wistful smile upon her oval face, could tear away a corner of the veil. She knew nothing; she had never sought to know; she had

lived in the same utter darkness as themselves. And now——

“Stand back, here it comes ! ”

Two or three figures sprang forward to swing back the gates. There was a lodge just inside, but its doors were for ever barred, and its windows stared out like blind eyes: Spartan Loder had had no use for a lodge-keeper.

A false alarm. It was not the doctor's gliding Panhard, and it came in the wrong direction. Through the dusk loomed a low basket-chaise. A slow laugh, clear as the note of a silver bell, curiously jarring at that moment, rippled through the hush.

“Carlotta Barrington ! ” someone whispered.

The pony reared to a standstill. The girl gripping its reins craned out, a picture hat of poppies and corn waving above her fair, imperious face with its crown of chestnut hair.

“Blanche, look—look ! What has happened ? ” She swung dramatically round to face the staring crowd. “Why are all you people waiting here ? What is feared ? Surely we should have been first to hear of it ? ”

“Seems you weren't, miss,” came back a voice in the pause. “They're saying the Manor House might have a master till dawn, but no longer.”

“Dawn ! Oh, how terrible ! You cannot mean it ! You have quite unnerved me, with all your faces staring through the dark like that.” She twitched the reins suddenly, sent the pony flying on, and bent across to peer into her sister's eyes. “You heard ? Terrible for *her*, I meant ! Put yourself in her place to-night, if it's true ! ”

"Sheba St John? Thanks!" Blanche's white teeth came together with a click. She seemed to shiver in her film of laces. "Holding her breath to hear her life sentence from the lips of a man—a madman—like Spartan Loder, you mean? She'll go as she came, I prophesy. What was the pretty story put into circulation? He went to London or somewhere on one of his periodical disappearances, saw her beautiful, tear-stained child's face in the street, heard that she had been deserted by a wealthy parent, took her to his withered breast on the spot, and brought her here to set every beautiful woman in the place tingling with jealousy. His grimmest stroke of perversity!"

"Wait!" Carlotta breathed back. "He lifts his hat to her still, we hear. That's more than most men do to their own wives, although they may never fail in respect to other men's wives; that's supposed to be one test of a gentleman. I only know one man of the sort—Doctor Gilbert Lancing; and I live to discover whether *he* veils an inward sneer with that splendid bow of his. But, do think of it! Perhaps only twelve hours more left between her and the last chance of the heir's appearance in time—between her and that vast fortune, you might say! For undoubtedly that is to be Spartan Loder's final stroke of irony. If the heir arrives in time, she stands back; if not, she can snap her fingers at all the world—a millionairess!"

"A woman who never cared two straws for money, you have heard over and over again!"

"Bah!" Carlotta swayed back with a derisive laugh. "She knew it was policy to prepare our minds for the worst. In her own mind—— But there,

the woman's a superb actress. Give her her due ! She wears the rosebud, startled shyness of a child veneered upon the subtle art of the syren ; and she has twisted that hard old stick of a man around her finger as no other woman could have done. It's clear as daylight ! That other girl, Judith Cottrell, his nurse, has found it out, and loathes her. They watch each other day and night up there like tigresses, I'm told. By-the-by, did you hear that the nurse was brought to the house, veiled, in Doctor Lancing's own car, and that nothing whatever can be found out about her ? It's all so strange that I long—I fairly long—to thresh it out ! ” She gave the reins another startling twitch. “ Yes ; pity that Sheba's final agony of suspense this night ! All or nothing, perhaps, after all these years of silent waiting ! For I will wager all I possess that not a living soul will know what Spartan Loder means to do with his money until it is too late to make one stroke of alteration. Heavens, yes, I feel for her ! ”

Down there at the end of the avenue the main door of the house stood ajar, letting out a sword of steady lamplight from the hall. Judith Cottrell, her brief spell of deep breathing in fresh air at an end, had a preference for the balcony doors opening into the dining-room. With calm, noiseless steps she went up the terrace, felt her way across the great, dark apartment, opened the door opposite—and drew back quietly. Just now, when the house was gripped in a spell of uncertainty, even a foot-step seemed to have a significance of its own. Someone was coming down the corridor to the hall.

Sheba, with her marble-like, oval face and wide, dry eyes? No; Mrs Saxon, the stately house-keeper, her keys jingling and silks rustling, had paused at the staircase foot to listen, and then swept on to glance out up the dark drive. Judith watched, half a smile on her weary-looking, Cleopatra-like face, as the other went back down the corridor. She could pause to smooth back her hair before taking that swift little rush on tiptoe across the hall. It had come to seem that any definite sound must be heard all over the house, with its echoing galleries and numberless niches. Even the ticking of the hall clock, answered by a muffled tick-tick from the library, jarred upon the nerves when a man like Spartan Loder lay at the threshold of the unknown.

Down the passage overhead she stole as if not wishing to be heard, opened a door near the end, and went in, turning a key on the inner side. The big four-poster stood in the far corner, all its curtains drawn. She was plucking back the folds to peer inside; she stepped quickly back as a faint rattle sounded behind. The door handle was slowly turning and re-turning. It was like a mute, imploring question; and it was answered at once. The door opened; she stepped out, holding it behind her.

"Yes, Miss St John; do you want me?"

"No—no!" Sheba's low, quivering voice vibrated in the pause. "I watched you, this time. You left him—turned this key upon him. You dared! . . . You shall not! Once again, Sister Judith, I ask you to allow me to enter this room—my guardian's room. I demand it, as my woman's right!"

"Just so! And I must repeat the one available answer," came the reply, full as quiet, and coldly determined. "Hush! if you please. It may seem strange to you, but Mr Loder is something more than your guardian at this critical moment. He is my patient—that is, I am responsible to his heir for anything that happens. In the doctor's words, not mine, Mr Loder must not, and shall not, be disturbed without some vital reason. You can give none! No doubt Doctor Lancing and his patient fully understand each other on the point. You and I are merely two women who——"

"I will not listen! That is only on the surface, and I can look below. I must see him for myself to-night—now! I will!—even if I am to make enemies in yourself and Doctor Lancing!"

So rigidly, wonderfully calm and quiescent until to-night, the white-faced girl repeated it wildly, pantingly, as lump after lump struggled to rise in her throat. All the sensitive nerves were quivering; all the long-suppressed agony of suspense had surged up in one wave. And Judith Cottrell's steady eyes watched her face as coldly as she might have studied a strange piece of sculpture.

"Be warned," she whispered. "I have to obey orders; and you cannot see him yet, most certainly. What is to be done?"

Sheba's fingers locked and twisted, as she looked along the silent corridor, in which lights had burned all night for weeks now, and which she had paced in sleepless hours.

"Oh, for a man's strength, a man's brain, to-night!" It rose in her throat almost unconsciously.

"You may have them yet!" came the whisper

again, almost maliciously soft. But it went unheard.

"The minutes are going—going! All that has been said to him, to sway him, I'm not to know—perhaps never shall know; but I love him, honour him, for all his cold, strange ways. He is more to me than I could ever tell him—yes!"

"Mr Loder? Impossible!" the watching woman breathed. "I have been led to suppose him a confirmed woman-hater in every sense of the word. My mistake?"

"A lie; a mean, contemptible lie!" Sheba's voice trembled. "Why has he not once sent for me—not once called my name? Ah! you can bear mental agony with ease yourself; you told me so once—you have passed all thrills long ago. To me, this cruel silence has become worse than his death itself. Let me pass—you shall!"

"And rouse the house? Yes; if you really have a purpose in shortening Mr Loder's last living hours, scream, by all means. Scream! In his condition to-night, I could suggest nothing more dramatically effective."

The dove-grey figure held its ground. She spoke in a level, passionless voice; not once had the suggestion of an inward smile left her eyes—eyes that in certain moments seemed to emit a flicker of green light. It had been that deadly, calm determination which had given Sister Judith Cottrell her power from the outset. Imperceptibly she had assumed a gaolership of that northern corridor. And it was not yet to slip from her tight hold. Spite of all that day's rumours and whispers, Spartan Loder, the man of mystery, was

still clinging as tenaciously to life as he had clung to that life's secret.

"You hear?" Sister Judith bent closer to whisper. She had seemed to listen intently in the pause. "Scream, and so prove this affection for the man who, as all Felcote knows, lifted you from the depths and made you practically keeper of his keys—up till now, at all events! Who would dare to prophesy beyond to-night!"

And Sheba's slight figure became still; that heaving of her breast ceased; her lips set—her woman's endurance was at an end. She pointed.

"Not you! How dare you speak of that—in that way! I have thought for your comfort in every possible way; I have treated you as a sympathetic friend even, from the moment you stepped into this house. I could not account for your studied strangeness. If it means that you are scheming in the dark to usurp my position here—go!"

"Pardon me," came the unmoved reply, "what *is* Miss Sheba St John's precise position here? Because no one in Felcote seems to grasp it. And Mr Loder's nephew, if alive, might wish to know something deeper!"

Still further, incredulously, Sheba drew back from the breath that fanned her cheeks. The words surged up with a rush, but she made her life's effort and kept them back. Spartan Loder, dying in there, should not suspect that her heart was near to breaking that night.

"Enough! Eloquent silence!" Still with the maddening, inscrutable smile, Sister Judith glanced back over her shoulder into the wide, dim room,

where the lamplight flickered and glistened upon the dark oak panelling. "And now I'll tell you something. Mr Loder is snatching a precious hour of sleep—conserving his energies for a possibility so vital to him that he was allowed a drug. One thing more! Through his doctor, he engaged me expressly for the duties I am now performing. Until the end I remain in complete possession of these rooms; your authority, or the rest of the household affairs, are nothing to me. Hence, your outbreaks of excitement being as dangerous as dramatic, I am going to close this door and refer you to—to Doctor Lancing! Let him answer!"

"Answer? He shall!" From head to foot the slight form quivered again, as if fighting back a terrible longing to strike a blow that should end it all on the spot. "He shall! For some deep reason, you have an understanding with that man. I am to be kept in the background—to know nothing of what goes on. And you have succeeded. More!" The shining eyes struggled against a film of faintness. "You hate me; and perhaps the future will reveal a reason as vile as the fact. You are not the woman I would have chosen to watch over him. That was my place, if any woman's!—and it was taken from me in a way that I never mean to forget! I may be wrong, but I feel—something tells me that I am to hear of his call when it is too late for me to answer! There is a Law—and there is God!"

And the grey figure bowed without wincing.

"Exactly. And there is something on Mr Spartan Loder's mind of which you apparently

know nothing, and which the sacredness of my duty forbids me suggesting. Perhaps you have heard a rumour that he is mad. Believe me, he is perfectly sane. He is straining every nerve and fibre to survive the moment when his nephew, Mr Wilfred Spurr, reaches Felcote—if he is ever fated to reach it. In other words, he is living only upon that hope. I —” there was the merest suspicion of tremor in her level voice—“I do not pretend to read Doctor Lancing’s inner mind as clearly as Miss St John may do, but I hold his explicit warning that the slightest unnecessary excitement now may cheat your guardian of the power to set right some great wrong. That ends all.”

“Unnecessary!” The hot surge of resentment had passed. Suddenly cold, her fingers strained together, Sheba stood to realise that the world outside was already pointing a finger at her—that Spartan Loder’s impending end left her in the position of an adventuress here. “I may not speak one word, to tell him once how grateful I have been for all! No, there is another name for this—conspiracy! I know it; I hear some of the whisperings; I am not blind! It is feared I may speak to him of—of the money. He knows, and God knows, I have never once given a thought to that. Never!”

“Never?” she whispered slowly. Sheba had come close again, her oval face deadly pale.

“Sometimes—sometimes, Sister Judith, I feel *you know* that Doctor Lancing has twice asked me to become his wife, and that I refused. I distrust him, in the way that a true woman can

never explain—never tries to realise. And this—this is part of his revenge upon me ; he has seen in it the deadliest way to wound and humble me : the revenge of a closed door and mocking silence. And you know it all ! ”

It vibrated along the corridor, and left a strange hush. Both women seemed to be suspending their breath. Then, for once, the ghost of a laugh left Sister Judith’s cold lips.

“ If you really mean that,” she said, “ it might seem worth while endeavouring to win back his heart without delay ! Or, perhaps, you would like me to appeal to his man’s feelings on your behalf ? ”

Drawn up, motionless, Sheba answered with a look—the look that perhaps only a woman could interpret, and that made even Sister Judith flinch. But the triumph, if a triumph had been sought, was hers. She drew calmly back, to close the door and so end it.

No ! It had all but clicked, when there came from the far corner a sound—a dull, thrilling moan, twice repeated—that might have been “ Sheba ! Sheba ! ” And Sheba heard. The voice for which she had listened in agony for days ; the voice that had persistently called to her in her dreams ! The joy, the nameless fear, the vague awe of it, swept her from head to foot—gave her the rush of courage for which she had longed. She turned, with a choking little cry.

“ Mr Loder ! I know all—I am here ! He wants me—his own voice calls me ! ”

There could be nothing so definite as a struggle on that threshold. Sister Judith’s arm had shot out like a bar, but it was swept back ; Sheba

brushed by her with a daring resoluteness and strength that awed herself afterwards. Straight across to the curtained space in the shadowy corner she panted, her muffled sobs dying to a reverent whisper as she bent at last—at last!—over the grim, granite-like face, and stared close into its filmed, strange eyes.

“Mr Loder! You know me—Sheba? Only speak—only tell me there is one last thing I can do to pay for the life I owe you!”

CHAPTER II

"It's Sheba!" Deeper yet sank the thrilled voice. "I am here beside you; I am touching your poor hand; I want to know! What is it that they say lies upon your mind? Only try and tell me, if you feel that another day might dawn too late. Speak!—for the world's tongues to be silenced. Oh, Mr Loder!" Her trembling hand wavered up to lie upon his forehead. "It's just a word, just your own voice, that I've prayed to hear!"

And no word came. Only the vague, recurring rattle in his throat, like the distant drain of water down a pebbly beach. He was here—yet far away. That glaze over his staring eyes hung like an impenetrable veil between her and his unknown thoughts. And so he might pass away—the man who had more than once called her the oasis in his barren career.

Dumb, chilled as though a cold hand had gripped her heart, Sheba slowly drew back. Her wide eyes looked blankly out through the window, across to where the lights of Felcote twinkled through the warm dusk. What—what was happening in all this silence? The curtains dropped back; she did not even resist, as she felt herself being drawn away.

"There! *now* can Miss St John believe?" Sister Judith asked, ever so softly. "That is the

beginning and end of your mystery. He wants no one in life except his nephew; he is dead to all else. Be merciful—let him sleep!”

“Sleep?” Sheba whispered, as through a rising mist. “I don’t understand. He struggled to speak. It is more like a trance. What medicine have they given him? Why was it safe to leave him, if only for minutes? Why drugs, if he suffers no acute pain and struggles only to keep a clear mind? God knows—God knows if you have a motive for sealing his lips!”

No answer was vouchsafed. She had spoken it half to herself, and Judith Cottrell had bent between the curtains to pass the long white hand soothingly across the patient’s face. While Sheba stood rooted, the dreamlike unreality growing with each second, there came up a panting, hic-coughing sound from the drive below, followed by voices in the hall. It brought Sheba back to the living present with a sharp breath-catch. She felt out towards the door; then, on some unexplained instinct, she had to pause and look back at Sister Judith. Judith’s face had whitened; her nostrils dilated; but her self-possession remained. Calmly, swiftly, she set the bottles in array, and removed a linen apron she was wearing.

“Yes, here he is!” she said. “Eight o’clock, to the minute! I forgot!” She swung round, with the deadly smile. “Shall I speak? Have you been longing all this time to see Doctor Lancing alone, and force him to speak out what he knows? Being a man, he could not refuse.”

She knew! For one whirling moment Sheba faced her, half determined to take her at her word

—to confront Doctor Gilbert Lancing simply in his capacity as a medical man who had charge of Spartan Loder's case. She had taken a step—only to waver with a sense of sick helplessness. That smile of Judith's, like winter moonlight over marble, seemed to imply that he was to hear first the words that Sheba had spoken that night—words that, coming from the woman he had wanted would deepen his enmity. No; she would not come face to face with him again—she had scorned him in the hearing of another woman.

There was no time to obey anything but her woman's first warning instinct. She had swayed round and reached the corridor, as if to escape something hateful, almost before she knew it. And simultaneously, in a glow of candlelight, Doctor Gilbert Lancing's glossy silk hat rose above the head of the staircase. Mrs Saxon, carrying the candles, was just behind him, outdistanced by his leaping steps.

No time to turn back. He had seen her, she knew, as she swerved aside into that next doorway on the right—Judith Cottrell's own private room. For Sheba to take fugitive advantage of a door ajar was an unusually weak impulse, and intuitively he seemed to fathom its meaning. Waving the housekeeper to go on, he leaned back his tall, exquisitely groomed figure, to stare into the obscurity. She stood quite still, her heart booming thickly—defiantly. He could see nothing, but she could feel the flames of colour run up from her throat as she watched his keen face—the face clear-cut and delicate as a woman's, with its fair, sweeping moustache, and the pale blue eyes that

always seemed to put a question no true woman cared to meet. It was the expression which redeemed his face, and redeemed it only too distinctly, from a suggestion of weak effeminacy. Behind the soft, studied languor of the man lay a brain ever silently at work.

"I hate you! Oh, I hate you!" she was whispering unconsciously, her fingers clenched. "Appeal to you as a man—no! A woman's tears—your triumph!"

What made her say it? She might never know. Fate had lent Gilbert Lancing the something called magnetic personality—subtle fascination that cost him nothing, Carlotta Barrington had named it. People forgot that it was barely five years since he had bought the dwindling practice. Barely forty, he had frozen out two local rivals, made his mark, and was apparently treading a primrose path. Felcote—the feminine element, at any rate—was at his feet. All the deeper the secret irony of the fact that the one woman in Felcote whom he had set himself to win stood to-night behind an impassable barrier of scorn and silence.

He moved on; the door of Mr Loder's room closed. Sheba held her breath until Mrs Saxon had rustled by again, and then, swift as a hunted thing, sped down the rear staircase and gained the dark drawing-room unseen. She could realise now that her head was burning, while hands and feet were numbed as with cold. That great sob in her throat would not break; her breath came in strange, irregular gasps that no one would understand. She wanted to cry out, and could not.

In that last hour the strain of the whole situation had become like a wire tightened to snapping point. It must break—something was to happen; she was sure of it, as she might never be of anything else in life. Were they all attributing her sleepless anxiety to the haunting thought of the money and the afterwards? Impossible! and yet of a sudden the great house seemed to contract and grow suffocatingly small; the heat of the summer evening was unbearable; that soft breeze fanning up from seaward had surely died quite away. To escape from the four walls, and stand all alone for an hour!—to decide what her first step must be if the end came soon!

The horror, the shame, the bitterness of it! She had long tried to be blind, but the jealousy around her was visible now, peering at her like animals' eyes out of darkness. The servants—all save Mrs Saxon—kept at a distance, and talked among themselves. Felcote was holding its breath to watch some tragedy unfold. Judith Cottrell, of all women had dared to hint that her power here was a golden illusion, to pass away with Spartan Loder's last breath. To-morrow, perhaps——

She quivered suddenly, snatched up a lace antimacassar glimmering in the darkness, and caught at the balcony door. She listened, as she had never listened yet.

"Miss St John! . . . Where are you? I want to speak with you!"

His voice! Quiet, musical, but with almost a commanding note, it came across from the staircase. She could picture him leaning over the balustrade, one shapely hand at his chin. He

always seemed to know—to read through darkness and the dress-folds that trembled over her breast! Answer him? It might be that he had a message from Mr Loder's lips—it might be that he had suddenly seen his opportunity to play upon her woman's hopes and fears.

"Miss St John!" it came. "Are you there?"

"No—no!" her heart longed to send back; but her teeth were tightly set, and then she seemed suddenly to stand upon the brink of a chasm, with no alternative but to leap.

He had taken a bound down the remaining stairs, and was striding across the hall. Thrilled by impalpable fear, she crashed the glass door behind her, and was down the steps, fleeing across the gravel sweep, hearing nothing, seeing nothing.

It seemed only an instant before she found herself at the main gates, staring at the crowd still waiting there for the news of life or death. A brief, strange pause; they were drawing back, as she was doing. To them, at such a moment, with her unseeing eyes and pale face, she had the look of a spirit. And then, before she had realised, a throat was cleared, and a voice—Anthony Lee's rough voice—called out huskily:

"It's all right! God bless you, Miss Sheba—take heart!"

She tried to answer. They would never forget her eyes at that moment, but no words would sound. The fear behind loomed above all. She was gone again—was flying breathlessly down one of the side paths that would bring her out farther down the Felcote road. A bramble caught in her hair and tore away a thick strand; but she

scarcely felt the pain. To escape him!—to be alone with her woman's heart for a while!

The road was reached. She walked rapidly on, hiding her face in the wrap when anyone passed, turning aside in a lane as carriage lights and a rich laugh behind told her that Carlotta Barrington was driving back into Felcote. Felcote? She suddenly remembered: Gilbert Lancing's car might presently come thundering by on the return journey. Without a second thought she swerved down the loose, shingle-cart track that sloped toward cliffs and sea.

Now, at least, she felt free of the danger-zone. On either side the gorse heath stretched away with its scent of almonds and its clumps of gold blossom glimmering in the half light, and, only a good stone's-throw farther on, lay the edge of the great, restful, eternal sea itself.

Felcote town proper was actually within two miles of the sea, but had never seemed to grasp the fact, and its possibilities. There was no coast-guard station, no roadway cut direct to the cove; and it was comparatively seldom that anyone came this way after dark. Sheba gave that no thought. Now she had passed breathlessly under the grotto-like arch of the Gap—a mere fissure in the high cliff wall—and was standing on the strip of velvety-soft sand, drinking in the puffs of spray-scented wind that rose as if to greet her.

The wonder, the beauty, the indescribable peace of it, she had never realised until to-night. White almost as snow the sand looked in a sudden flood of moonlight, that threw fantastic shadows behind every rock boulder; and far down it

crawled a foam-tipped lip that marked the turn of the slack tide. Across the ebon-black water, stretching away as into eternity, lay countless paths of silver sequins, now fading, now reappearing. It was all solemn, haunting, soothing beyond words. Surely she might forget for a moment the fateful something beating away like a muffled drum at the heart of the great silence!

How long she stood motionless there she would never know. It was when she turned mechanically to go back that her ears caught that familiar sound—hateful to-night—the panting of a petrol car. She was in the cliff gap; she stood still again. And now she could make out the car, with its black and amber tonneau. Yes—yes, it had paused in the roadway beyond there; some figure had leaped down and sprung through the halo cast by the great lamp reflectors.

Her eyes strained; every fibre in her body seemed to stiffen. She was trapped. She heard the light, steady crunch on the shingle path, heard the delicate little cough. The man's intuition had served him well to-night. His opportunity had come. The cigarette tip glowed crimson between his lips. He had found out; he had followed her here.

Here! It was as if she had been suddenly shut off from her world—the sea behind, and those towering cliffs on either hand. For a moment she stood drawn up, tingling with resentment and scorn, her lips closed upon a word that he should never forget in life. He dared not—he dared not use his man's strength to put a woman at bay! . . . and then on another impulse, no more to be re-

sisted than analysed, she had taken a little run back to the sandspit, flitted along by the cliff wall, and stood still in a patch of deep shadow. He had not seen her. To balk him—to beat him at his own loved game of hide-and-seek—to let him go as he had come, unanswered!

One—two—three—and he had come striding through the cove. He hummed a tune as carelessly as if he were entering his own drawing-room. Then, the silence. Feet sank soundlessly into this carpet of sand, but she knew that he had paused just within the cliff-arch, every nerve in his tall, aristocratic figure straining with the eagerness of the hunter nearing his prey. His prey! That would have been the word in his own mind, but in hers there was nothing but fierce scorn. There could be no reason at all for that dull throbbing of her heart—so plain that it seemed almost certain he must hear it! She did not fear him in the least—no! There was a peal of wild laughter gathering in her throat that he would never forget.

But it died back. He was barring the only way out. He had meant to subdue her, if it lay in man's power; she knew that by unerring instinct. All else was blotted from her mind. She was a woman at bay.

CHAPTER III

PERHAPS Sheba could have counted fifty, before there came again that significant little cough, as if he wished to prepare her for his step farther. Now she could see him fully. Hands rigid at his side, he was staring keenly into all the dark patches, his blue eyes flickering with the suppressed suspense—the daring of his own passion where such a woman was concerned. Slowly he drew off one grey kid glove; two jewelled rings sparkled in the moonlight as he put the shapely hand to his ear, listening. Then it came, with almost an imploring note.

“Am I mistaken? Miss St John, you are here!”

Her pulse leaped; her teeth clenched upon a new thought. If she allowed him to ask that more than once, she should never dare to reveal herself voluntarily—could never look him in the face again. Did he discover her, her own apparent fear had given the incident a grotesquely false importance. He was looking intently at her veil of shadow. He was bending forward, with parted lips. Just in time, with a great effort, she moved out, took a few steps, and faced him. The very intensity of the effort saved her. Run past him?—never! One look, one deep breath—and she was gloriously cool and collected. It sounded without a tremble.

“Miss St John is here—yes! And indeed sorry

to put Doctor Lancing to the humiliation of following her so far to no purpose!"

"You scared me, I admit," he whispered with a little laugh, wiping something from his forehead. "I was not *quite* certain, and to see you step out like the spirit of the rocks! But you mistake. I suppose a man may have better motives than those usually supposed to sway such a man as you think me, for instance?"

"I don't think of you in any light. I never intend to!" she answered, queenly in her still dignity.

"False! A woman's white lie! Sorry!" he breathed, putting out his hand swiftly, as she moved. "Listen at once! I left Mr Loder's house to-night simply determined to nail down a—what shall I call it?—a little unpleasant misapprehension that appears to lie between us. I intend to, at once. Oh, you know what I mean, Miss St John! Your eyes are a mirror—to one man, at any rate!"

"Indeed?"

At first her sole idea had been to escape from the trap without losing a shred of her womanliness; now it had strnck her that, if she could bring herself to hear and answer him, it might suffice for all time. Why not?—why let the shadow of this fear lie upon her another night?

"Speak, then!" she said. "I am not afraid of anything that concerns myself."

"I will. Your opinion of me has fallen in this hour to zero, I know; but I do not intend to go on my knees and apologise. It is too late for that. Now my chance has come, I want an answer

to one question. Just forget all else, if you can. Why, because you would not accept me as a lover, did you cease to trust me as a man?"

It came with a challenging, masterful emphasis that seemed to echo along the cliff and come back to her. She scarcely felt his grip upon her wrist. Her mind had been such a whirling chaos lately that she could not use the defensive weapons lent to woman at a crisis. She stood mute, stunned.

"I mean it, even if I express it with brutal frankness, considering that you and I are alone here!" he went on, stooping closer yet. "I have my own sensitiveness, although it has stood shocks that should have killed it long ago. I chose this moment, I own, because fate seemed to put it into my hands at the supreme hour—because this is between our two selves, and concerns no one else in the world. Either I am a villain in veneer, or I am what I have honestly struggled to be—a gentleman, quite worthy of a woman's trust. From to-night, it is for you to decide which I shall be. And there is only one woman breathing upon whom such a decision could rest. Do you realise?"

"You—you are speaking very strangely, Doctor Lancing," she was able to say. So long as she could keep her figure coldly still, he need not know how the waves of faintness surged beneath her wrapper. She had vaguely recollected that there might be eyes to see, if not ears to hear. And poisonous whispers ran so far and so fast in Felcote!

"Doctor!" He snapped his teeth upon some deeper word. "Why will you cling to that hollow

conventionality? You shall not. I have thrown off that mantle here; I am face to face with the woman whom I asked to be my wife. Sheba!" He tried to catch both her hands in a convulsive grip. "I honoured you when I asked that, if you knew it! There was never another woman whom I wanted for love's pure sake alone—for love and for life! You saw me smile, but I could have killed you that night when you finally turned from me—so that no other man should take to his arms what I could not have! Look into my face—tell me! When and why have I bartered my man's right to your respect?"

The words beat hotly against her cheeks. She looked around with a sense of suffocation, as a fresh flood of moonlight wavered past and ran over the water in golden ladders; but there was no sign of any living creature in the bay.

"You won't answer?" he whispered fiercely. "I can make you; I can pay any price, so long as I know I have made you think of me in the right light. You rouse the devil that lies in every man; you will not hear; you are invariably antagonistic to me without knowing why. I wanted to speak with you to-night quite courteously—I had waited for days past to do so; and I might as well have tried to grasp a shadow! I called to you; I rang for Mrs Saxon; and no one knew. But it so happens that someone in the road had seen you taking this path. What, in my place, would you have done? Would you have hesitated to appear in the blackest light, so long as you broke the maddening silence of the woman you hungered for? Hunger? That is not the word.

I ask in you only a little of woman's warmth—woman's softness—woman's pity! You have them all, and you seal them in ice that I cannot thaw. There is bound to be an end to this that one of us will regret! . . . There, no, no! I have frightened her. Sheba, dear one, let the past be quite forgotten! Let the living present be our threshold into new life! To-night I come to you as a man and say—will you trust me? And I have a right to a reply or a reason!"

He had drawn stiffly back, his clear-cut face sombre and deadly. It was the knowledge of that very past which fed the flame within him! Now, if ever, she realised that she must repulse him with a woman's best weapon—chilling indifference—even though she were false to her nature.

"Does Mr Spartan Loder trust you?" she asked firmly.

"What do you mean?" he trembled.

"You have proved to-night that you cannot trust yourself—that is what I mean."

"No! You are doubting whether all that *could* be done for him, *has* been done! Is that it?—is that the misgiving between us? Then, end it. Wire to London to-night, and call in the highest medical authority at my expense. Suspend your judgment on me—abide by the developments. I had grave reason to fear this suspicion; and others have fathomed it, too. If your doubt of me in that way is sincere, you will not hesitate to act. All I ask is, that the result shall be made public!"

"I knew it!" she whispered. "You have just

seen his nurse. It is surprising how much information Sister Judith Cottrell can convey in a given time!"

That next pause! He had lifted his hat, with a mocking smile. Was the tension broken?—would he walk away without another word? Her heart took one more uncertain bound—to sink heavily again. With a sinister affectation of familiarity he had struck a match and lit a cigarette. The vesta's brief glow showed the expression of a man who meant to risk something to gain his ends. That cliff wall behind him seemed to be swaying for a fall. Heavens, if the threatening faintness should master her—here!

"Now!" he said, quietly. "I think we will leave Miss Cottrell's name quite out of it. What I am asked to face is this. Intentionally or not, you have put a bomb beneath my honour and reputation. Felcote will expect me to account for a distinguished patient's death. Ah!"

Her hand had wavered out to him half unconsciously. A little moan left her throat.

"Don't! Don't say that—don't tell me there is no hope!"

"If anyone but Miss St John asked, I should be bound in truth to say that there is not a grain."

She swayed a little, beat back his hand, turned away, and fought the last bit of battle. All was changed now—she knew the truth. She turned, with the steady little whisper:

"You'll let me go, please. Let me go to him—the man I do honour!"

"Wait! What of the man who must live?" He had sprung. The cigarette fell; a trail of

sparks flew over the sand carpet. He had dared all in one rush of passion—had drawn her to him, and was looking down close into the glazed, beautiful eyes. “You shall hear my last word! I wrong no living person, least of all *you*, in failing to strangle my hunger for the one woman I could love as a man ought to love! Yes; I dare to confront you with that forbidden word once again. I have broken down the barrier—it is all or nothing now. Sheba! Darling—darling! Why do you make me speak as I have spoken to-night? Look up at me; you must—you shall! A woman’s warm beauty is not a thing to be hidden away, and a man’s passion cannot be killed in a day. You look more beautiful to-night—something to tempt a man to risk all—than ever you did. Sheba! I am not raving; but I know how soon this precious moment must slip from me. This is your true environment: the constant sea, the eternal silence, and—love! Can I help myself? I offered you all that a man can offer—my life’s devotion; and you hurled it back at me. But I was not beaten. I have lived upon the thought that one may love what one has once loathed. Sheba! Our two lives are in the balances. Decide for the last time!”

“Let me pass!” she repeated pantingly. “I have answered you in words that I can never take back. Let me go!”

“I cannot! What have I ever said or done to make you hate me? It *is* hate! It shines in your eyes, it trembles on your lips. It is there now—the look that might change the truest man into the worst. And that will happen! Think again!

You know at least something that all women do not know: I am not wooing you for money—you may be penniless! There, I have said all that a desperate man could say; and now—what is it to be between us? There may come a time when you will need the strength of a strong man's arm. You might, if the worst happens, step from your present position into one immeasurably higher! But you shall speak, I say! I am not the man to have humbled myself to this degree without some definite hope. Tell me that I have been wrong—it was never hate, but womanly hesitation!"

She had fought slowly free of his grip. The brown eyes met his own unflinchingly, for the last effort.

"God keep me from ever answering with a lie to save myself, Mr Lancing! I have never hesitated. I will never force myself to give back an artificial love to the man who——"

"Silence! Sheba, be warned; you don't know what I am capable of. Let the love come! It will—it must—afterwards. Think of all there is at stake for you to-night. I can make you queen of a home that no woman would despise. And the love would have crept in before you realised!"

"Never!" A slow shiver ran down the slight figure. The end of her woman's endurance had almost been reached, and it showed in her dilated eyes.

"You are frightened of me! You know you have made the mistake of your life!" he laughed, bending endearingly close. "There, let yourself be a true woman; let all the load of fear to-night be put upon me. Seal the future—kiss me once!"

and Sheba's clenched hand was swung desperately against the lips brought so close. She fought back the impulse to cry out something that should be heard on the Felcote road ; her voice thrilled with quietest dignity.

"I am a woman, Mr Lancing—and you are a gentleman, I still wish to believe. Stand aside this moment, please—or do not attempt to enter the Manor House once again while I am here!"

"My answer!" He gave her wrist a little wrench, and stepped back mockingly. His hat had fallen ; his fair, close curls were picturesquely disordered in the moonlight. "You realise, of course, precisely what you mean by that threat. The scandal of the fact that Mr Loder's medical man is ordered from the premises, and that Mr Loder may breathe his last a few hours earlier as a consequence."

"No—no!" she whispered. "You have a duty to perform—you will do it. I spoke as—as any woman would have spoken. He—he need not know what I have to face when he is gone."

"Very good. I will stand out of your path to-night. But I am in your life for ever and ever! Heavens! if you knew what you are leaving as you turn—a man scorned by the one woman in this world he would die to make happy. Think!"

The thick whisper drove through her brain, to remain there in memory for ever. She did not, could not, reply, whatever happened of her silence. Her heart throbbing as it might never throb again, a mist seeming to float up from the sand and blur everything, she moved slowly towards the way out—that narrow gap in the cliff wall. Now her feet had touched the loose shingle beyond, and she was

groping instinctively off at an angle to avoid the car that stood panting in its halo of light. She seemed to be climbing out of a dark pit, hands and feet threatening to slip at any moment.

She had mastered her physical weakness to this supreme point, but if once she heard the quick crunch of his feet on the pebbles behind, she knew that one tragic cry would wake the still evening—one cry that might change the course of her destiny.

But no sound came. He was clever enough, deep enough, to fathom all that hinged upon it—to stand quite still and watch her out of sight. The world was between them once again. For the third and last time he had offered her his love and his life, and she had turned from them with a shudder that no man could mistake. She had simply used her woman's right; there was surely nothing left for him but to keep discreet silence for the sake of his own good name. And yet. . . .

Was it all real? She seemed like a phantom, able to move unheard. In dreadful stillness she had mounted the balcony steps, passed the wide hall and the staircase undetected, and was standing still and weak in her own quiet room—impossible as it seemed. When, a little later, she heard "Miss Sheba!" being called in all directions, and the anxious Mrs Saxon came up in person to know what was wrong, she could reply quite calmly that she was still in her room. All the treacherous trembling had gone that might betray her. Her head ached, she whispered. She knew that Mrs Saxon, at least, would not be set wondering at that fact. Mrs Saxon's silence

was the silence of a vast, awed sympathy and misgiving.

All over! She had done listening at her door. Clearly there had come no fresh call from Spartan Loder's lips—he would be still steeped in that halfway lethargy. And now for a terrible stretch of hours she lay staring out at a sky like blue cloth frosted with countless tiny spangles. For, if she allowed her eyes to close once, there flashed across the blank a picture—a moonlit strip of deserted sand, with Gilbert Lancing's sinister figure barring her one way back to the road. His wife—or nothing!

No, no, she would not hate him for his passion—God keep her from that! But she was a woman, with all a woman's thoughts. And, unless something intervened, she knew that she stood that night like one blindfolded upon the brink of a precipice—a woman fearing to take one step.

CHAPTER IV

"DON'T start, Miss Sheba!—nothing has happened yet. Why are you in the dark? The rector called, and two gentlemen from Barrowdene; and Carlotta Barrington sent up a note from the gates. I got rid of them all quietly, without troubling you. But life is life, you must remember. And so dinner is laid, and has been waiting nearly half-an-hour. Come!"

"Laid! For whom?—where? But I implored them not to think of it. I sent down a note by Sophie!"

"Exactly; and I took it from her hand and tore it up. Come now, dearie! Poor cook is fuming; we must not discourage her too much. I want to keep everything working in Mr Loder's clockwork way, or the servants will get out of hand, with all these wretched whispers of an entire change to take place. Dinner is waiting! No use; you must rise to the occasion—that white face in itself is nature's warning. You may need all your strength yet!"

Mrs Saxon's cheerfully determined voice trailed off a little huskily. At that moment, as her candle-light shone unexpectedly in, and Spartan Loder's ward swayed up from some obscure corner of the drawing-room, the deep brown eyes looked unnervingly wide and shining for the oval face set upon so slender a throat. Tears, as Doctor Lancing had

just whispered to the housekeeper, are like a fever—perilous when suppressed.

“Yes—yes!” came the breathless reply. “Tell cook—tell them all I’m sorry it should happen again, but I wanted nothing to-night. If—if I could only act one thing and feel another! I might be happier all through life. But I cannot! Let me alone! It won’t be for long—not much longer!”

And Mrs Saxon closed the door tightly, as the muffled sobs grew higher. It was a time to be severe.

“Miss Sheba, what are you saying? Things cannot go on in this strange way. One more day has gone, you see; I have not abandoned the last hope yet. You stare? My dear young lady, if my fifteen years’ close experience here counts for anything, and there is one man on earth to cheat his doctors and astound us all, it is Mr Spartan Loder. Look at Miss Cottrell!—she takes her food calmly up there in the very room. There, no—you are not going back to your bedroom. I insist! The dinner looks a picture. Follow me in—let me lift just two covers!”

Sheba took two dozen steps, only to pause again, the hand to her forehead.

“I know—I understand,” came her dull voice. “You are kind and thoughtful; it is wicked of me to seem so cold and strange; but I could not—not to-night! The food seems to choke me. Oh, think! To sit in that great room by myself, knowing that in the same house——”

“Hush! hush! I have just thought something—you need not!” Mrs Saxon glanced out into

the hall, and leaned in again to whisper. "After all, it is the merest courtesy in the circumstances, and Mr Loder himself could hardly object, even if he knew. Why not let me ask Doctor Lancing to stay for dinner? But why not, dearie?"

Sheba had drawn in her breath sharply, and set her teeth as upon a cry.

"He is not here," she could whisper at last. "I—I was told he had gone."

"He came back. Yes, there's the car waiting in the drive. Sister Judith sent after him to ask—I believe—about the medicine. He hurried up again, and I left them talking outside the room. Believe me, Miss Sheba——Hark! here he comes."

She vanished. She was painfully particular on the point of ushering in and bowing out Doctor Lancing with all the stately deference due to the man whose quick white fingers and smiling confidence suggested power to prolong the master's life. For all save Sheba, he seemed to move ever in an atmosphere of indescribable glamour and fascination. For all save Sheba!

She made her mental struggle, as his calm voice came through from the hall. Twenty-four hours had dragged by since she had heard it last, and its note was different now; she still tried to believe that she had lived through that nameless ordeal in a dream. What was he saying?

"Don't hurry—don't alarm her, Mrs Saxon! Just say that I deem it my duty to speak with her at once—if that be possible." And the unconscious housekeeper gasped.

"Possible? Certainly; why not? Miss Sheba!" She had drummed at that door. There was no

way of escape—even if she could have taken it. She stood perfectly still, looking past him, as Mrs Saxon set the gas flaring its light upon her rigid face. Mrs Saxon looked at them both, and then, as the pause held, softly withdrew. Hat and gloves in hand, he had stood as motionless and grave as if there were a secret to be imparted.

Sheba's resolutely quiet voice cut the silence first. She refused to whisper. It was not true—not true that this man had ever held her tightly to his breast and stared down into the windows of her woman's soul! No man would have dared it, and then faced her to-night in this way!

"You come to prepare me?—to say that the end is in sight?"

"No! I am puzzled. I ask Miss St John to believe me when I say that I was never confronted with a more mysterious illness—or, perhaps I should say, a more mysterious man. No; the scales still seem to swing much as they did yesterday. He has thought, he has moved, he has spoken. But it is not precisely that."

The shapely finger-tips moved link by link along his chain. He was watching her, as something he had never met before and might never meet again. Half spellbound by the proximity, spite of her inner dull contempt for herself, she had to look fixedly back at the handsome face with its cameo-like clearness, its sweep of fair moustache, its cold blue eyes. Why had he come back? Was he daring to tell himself that time must bury the dramatic effect of yesterday's fight for her heart? He felt safe, maybe. No one in

the world knew—no one but himself. No one would believe it!

His voice, courteously arresting, came across again.

“It is this. This unknown trouble that holds Mr Loder completely in its grip has partly nullified all my efforts from the beginning. Yet, on the other hand, I am convinced beyond all doubt that he will sink away, so to speak, from the very moment when that tense anxiety is removed. What ought to be done? The case has a psychological side, quite apart from the medical. He is powerless, dependent upon a freak of fate. I come to you—I must come to you! I may not be here. Should this nephew, this Wilfred Spurr, whose name has moaned incessantly on his lips from the moment——”

Once more the hypnotic pause. His eyes tried hard to meet and draw hers to himself; but she looked resolutely at the swaying window curtains, and waited as if unconscious of undercurrents. He glanced back to make certain the door was closed, before he took a step nearer and went on quickly.

“May I ask something? *You* are the one person we know of, I presume, who has some idea of the nature of Mr Loder’s dying anxiety?”

“None!” It left her lips unbidden, before she could think. She had seemed to be listening to some sound other than his voice. “None!” And he drew incredulously back.

“None? Then the thing becomes infinitely more delicate. I meant to suggest that, if money were spent immediately, it ought to be possible to

reach his nephew in some way. I trust I am not rude, but North America is not such a vast place when the cables and newspapers can be set to work at an hour's notice; and I hear that Mr Loder's nephew is known to be in that region. It is our solemn duty—I mean, yours—to do something, even though he arrive too late? A thousand pounds spent to-morrow for a blazing advertisement in all the leading North American papers! I believe he would order it this moment, if his mind could allow. I do!"

And Sheba turned slowly to answer the challenge. She made no attempt to do more—to fathom the motive.

"I do not. I happen to know that a series of such advertisements has failed to bring any news, and that his lawyers are working night and day. I cannot sign Mr Loder's cheques. You speak of a thousand pounds: I believe he has already sunk ten times that amount in the endeavour."

"For what—for what earthly reason?" He had to gasp it.

"That," she whispered, "lies between himself and his God alone."

"Then, nothing can be done? I spoke, because it has become terrible, haunting, to see a man lying in that dumb agony, clinging desperately to some object which appears only too definite to himself and shadowy to all those around him!"

It sounded like a veiled sneer. He was going. At the door he turned abruptly, his teeth shown by a half-smile.

"I had almost forgotten. I gather from Miss Cottrell that you considered yourself unreasonably

shut out from your guardian's apartments. That cannot be—shall not be. Against my own professional instincts, I have left her instructions that Miss St John is to see him at any moment she wishes, and as often as she wishes—now, in the night, at any time left of his life.”

The smile, the bow, and he was gone. She heard the hall door close, and the Panhard panting away in distance; but for minutes longer she stood on in dazed incredulity, so deep that it seemed like stupor left by a drug. Then, scarcely realising it, she was going up the stairs and along that northern corridor. At any moment, now or to-morrow!—in one soft breath the shameful bar was broken down! Thrilled by gratitude, and yet chilled by some misgiving, she tapped at that door and stole through without waiting for an answer.

Could it be true? With clasped hands just inside, as if she had known and waited, stood the grey, erect figure of Sister Judith, the tireless and tranquil woman who never seemed to need more than a snatch of sleep, and gloried silently in her own bewildering sacrifice of self. One look, and she was drawing aside without a word. In an instant more Sheba was bending in breathless awe and question over the grimly yellow face of the man lying within a shroud of mystery.

And now? Judith Cottrell had followed her, and stood just behind, hands still folded, the set of her thin lips eloquent of “We shall see!”

Had the dying man gone beyond speech?—was that why the bar had been taken down to-night? Ominously still he lay, the film thicker over his

half-closed eyes, one hand twitching at regular intervals along the coverlet. Above the muffled ticking of a clock near by his breathing was to be heard—breathing like the faint drain of wavelets down some far pebble beach. Not a sound had Sheba dared to risk till, with frightening suddenness, something rattled in his throat.

“Who—who’s standing there?”

“Mr Loder! You know her—Sheba? Oh, surely!”

“Closer! I can’t see; sight—leaving me—now. It’s not—it’s not my little one?”

“Yours—yes, yes! Feel my hand; there, now you can be sure. Oh, if you knew how I have longed for this moment! I came last night, but you did not know me. Without you all life is so strange and silent! Some little thing I can do for you—there must be! Anything, anything, that a woman could do to make you happy! I’m so close—I can hear a whisper!”

Oblivious of the steady, fathomless eyes that looked on, she had stooped until her fast-coming breath fanned his old face—the rugged, hard face that to so many had been almost repellent in health. She could see for herself now how deep those furrows had eaten into the ghastly-hued features. She knew how, spite of his hoard and his iron will, he had known no real joy of life and looked for none. With the sunlight all about him he had walked perpetually in shadow. These later years of his life had been haunted by far-off scenes—ineffaceable visions of a past of which Felcote knew nothing. He was paying some great price. In the rector’s own sad phrase,

Spartan Loder had lived two distinct lives. And the secret of that other one—was a secret still.

They were whispering of it now down there in the servants' hall. In Felcote around—away in smoky Barrowdene—it was the same. As she stooped there she was ringed about by a zone of suspense and feverish speculation. She could almost seem to hear the suppressed hum of all the voices.

Spartan Loder had secretly feared to move beyond sight of his own grounds. Those few walks of his had been mainly restricted to the maze he had constructed, and of which he alone possessed the original plan. The maze might have been the outcome of a mere scientific freak—or it might have been thought out and built with a motive. The man had balked all curiosity with his tight-lipped, inscrutable smile. Only—Sheba knew this, because she had dared to watch—only at rarest intervals he had ventured down that shingle path to the lonely bay. He had stood on the tongue of sand as if transfixed—as if he heard voices calling to him across the waste from a land he alone could name. When he turned back, his gold-topped stick had shaken as in a hand suddenly palsied. But not even to Sheba, in his yielding moments, had he vouchsafed to explain the gaps in that long, strenuous past stretching behind him.

And now he was dying. Dying! in this quiet room in the northern corridor, with no real friend near him save herself. If only half that had been whispered was true the London newsboys would be now shouting his name!

It was the hour to be perfectly calm, like Sister Judith. He had spoken; he seemed to realise in part; he was still on this side of the great gulf. Only—only—Sister Judith's subdued sneer of yesterday had veiled a cold truth. It was not Sheba for whom, day and night, he dully watched and listened. It was for that other man, whom she might never see in the flesh—the nephew whose very existence seemed to Felcote and herself more than half chimerical—Wilfred Spurr!

Spurr! Was it all delirium? What was the truth of her own position here at this moment? Oh, to burst through all the barriers of silence and suspicion that had grown up of late around her! Oh, to be able, as a true woman, to *act*!

Not to be. His lips had taken the same old grim compression. It was a sign that hers could remain closed, too. He had nothing more in life to say to her!

Intensely lovable, fearless, sensitive, it was hard for her to harbour this unspeakable fear of hands and brains at work in the dark. Yet, as she drew slowly back in the thrill of that final disappointment, a question was forming in her throat—a question that must be answered now or never. Then she would act.

She caught her breath. She found herself staring round at space.

The sensation was more than strange. She had almost felt Sister Judith's breath upon her cheek—had kept her face resolutely turned from the cold smile on that watching woman's features. But the nurse was not here. She had slipped away; and for once had moved without that

peculiar rustle of her full skirts, like leaves stirred by a breeze.

Her opportunity!—maybe the last she would have in life. In an instant Sheba had sunk upon her knees between the curtains. Both the gaunt yellow hands were held firmly in her own.

“Mr Loder! Look at me—look once! We are alone. Let me have one last word of yours to carry through life. What is it on your mind? Is there no one you wish to see besides your—your nephew? Not one in all the world? Oh, if you could only trust your Sheba still! A word—only a word!”

No—no! Nothing sounded. The heavy grizzled head had turned impotently, wanderingly, on its pillow.

“Then,” she whispered, fighting back her sobs, “you’ll let me sing—something that you know and once liked. That sweet Christmas carol that you woke me once to come down and hear—yes, you! There were tears in your eyes that night. It had taken you back to days when you were a boy, and could be thrilled by the Christmas carols! We stood down there on the balcony—you and I alone. You did not wish the servants to know. Barrowdene bells were ringing out. You remember that grand old song?”

She began in a soft, clear voice. He would recall it—he would turn to look at her—those tears might even film again in his old eyes.

No! Gradually her voice weakened and failed. He was listening—still listening—as if ready to fling back the coverlets and sway up with his last shout; but Sheba’s voice could not reach him.

His hands twitched away. It was all over—she could bear it no longer. After all, she had no real call upon Spartan Loder's last thoughts. Not the faintest! She could hear Carlotta Barrington's silver laugh peal out at the bare suggestion to-night.

"Then, good-night!" she breathed. "Not good-bye—only good-night. Remember, if you want me!"

She had turned. She had to look once again. Were his lips moving? Bending incredulously, she caught a few faint, gasping words—words she was never to forget.

"Make—make haste, Wilfred. . . . Sands running out, boy! To-night or never—no longer! . . . Pay price for all. . . . You little dream. . . . Heaven help us all!"

She could not move. It set her heart throbbing in sick, heavy beats. Second only to fear was her yearning desire to help him in time.

"Heaven will! Don't worry! He will be here yet, in time to know all—something tells me! He shall hear of it the moment he sets foot in Felcote. Trust Sheba there!"

And that one hushed word struck a chord. His hand was groping out for her. His voice strained.

"Sheba! Where is she? I said it; I meant it—no other way! It's there, in black and white, that no man can set aside. Make haste, Wilfred! Make haste, if—you—want—your—wife!"

Wife! For the instant it was as if lightning had forked down and laid bare the confused labyrinths of his brain. For the instant she could not bring herself to touch him again. A wife! The syllable

had left his lips as if it were the key to all the mystery. Wilfred—and a wife?

Then—then he had some hold upon his nephew ; had dared him to wed the woman of his choice ; had perhaps stood grimly between them all these years ; and now hungered to withdraw the ban ere it was too late. Or else—or else it meant that this Wilfred Spurr could not marry without the money which his uncle in England alone could give him. Who was the woman? Might she be on her way to Felcote, too? Might she, in a few weeks more, be mistress *here*?

She looked round instinctively to know if it had been overheard—if Sister Judith Cottrell had stolen back just in time. No! And the momentary flash of illumination had faded out. It was all a misty, inexplicable blank again. She had listened to some delirious fragment!

And next——

Days afterwards, she could dimly recollect nerving herself to smooth his damp forehead and adjust the pillows. And then she had that sudden awe of the silence and the big old-fashioned room, every oaken panel of which seemed to reflect and distort her shadow. What was happening? Was the lamp quite safe? Would he wish its light to fall at that angle across his face? With trembling hands she moved it back a little, drew the curtains, and now was closing the door softly. It seemed hard and unnatural to leave him to that stark loneliness even for a minute now. When might Doctor Lancing return? Where could Judith Cottrell be? Possibly in the next room—the room that had been prepared for her private convenience,

but which she had seldom used. Or, perhaps, she had taken the chance for her daily spell of fresh air in the quiet drive below.

Sheba felt sure of nothing to-night. She had paused in the corridor, a hand pressed hard to her temples. She must let some of this pallor fade out of her face. "To-night or never!"—the pregnant words rang through her brain. Had he meant that?—was it given to him to *know*? To-morrow! The word had an awful, hollow sound, as she repeated it to herself.

"Oh, for one friend!" she said, over and over. "Oh, if his nephew would only come, for this suspense to break!"

It was just as she had reached the stair-head. As if in direct answer, there came that never-forgotten noise of hoofs and wheels on the gravel path out there. Some vehicle pulled up sharply, seemed to wait barely a moment, and then was rattling slowly away again. Simultaneously the wire running round the galleried hall creaked and strained. The house bell pealed again and again, as if the visitor were wrenching away in a fever of impatience.

Not the doctor! He had discarded carriage wheels for the elegant Panhard car long since—and Doctor Gilbert Lancing's delicate fingers would never ring in that way if life itself depended upon the sound. Spurr! Wilfred Spurr, at last! The dogged London lawyers had triumphed; those persistent advertisements had reached their goal. In the psychological moment Wilfred Spurr had reached Felcote to learn his fate. She knew it—*knew* it.

Days later, she could not recollect experiencing the supreme, sweeping thrill which the moment seemed to justify. All seemed deadened. She was only conscious of asking herself one quiet little question. Should she fly back to that room and prepare him for his effort?—or should she wait and make quite sure?

She stood quite still at the foot of the first flight. She could see nearly the whole length of the hall passage; she could realise a murmuring and commotion at the far end. Craning a little, she watched Mrs Saxon wave back the servants and sweep for the door herself in her stateliest manner. Again the bell jangled with unnerving fierceness—the housekeeper broke into a run. Just as the door-chain clinked, and the scales of chance still swung, something made Sheba glance upward.

There, craning over the top balustrade, staring intently down past her, was Sister Judith Cottrell. That same instinct had flashed throughout the house like a telepathic telegram.

The hall door was flung back. The sudden, muffled silence was cut by a husky, anxious voice.

"Mr Loder!" it panted. "This is it—the Manor House? Am I——"

"Indeed, sir, yes! Then, you are——"

"Spurr! Wilfred Spurr! Heavens, why do you all . . . you don't say I'm too late!"

The reply was not to come from Spartan Loder's housekeeper. Almost ere anyone could seem to grasp the one vital fact—just as Sheba caught her glimpse of a dark, olive-faced man in a soft felt hat and fur-trimmed travelling ulster—Sister

Judith Cottrell's calm, penetrating voice had carried down to the hall far below.

"Is it Mr Wilfred Spurr? This way—this way at once—if you hope to see Mr Loder alive!"

CHAPTER V

CLEAR, tranquil, authoritative, that call broke the spell. Wilfred Spurr heard it, leaped for the staircase, and was stumbling feverishly up. Never had a dramatic situation seemed to develop more swiftly. Never—to one woman, at least—had a living moment seemed less like a fragment of real, everyday life.

He was here!

He had reached that first landing. He swerved uncertainly; he was staring at a still figure with an oval face and dilated eyes—staring as if he had never seen anything more beautiful and statuelike. Must he speak?—was hers the voice that had called?

He, on his side, was confronting a set-faced woman of whose name and presence here he could scarcely have been aware. And Sheba, her volition numbed, her lips unable to part, stared back at a bearded man of perhaps thirty-five, his dark features rendered more strikingly dark by the upward surge of blood and the tan of a fiercer sunshine than England could ever give.

It had all happened in a few seconds. Then his hat was lifted abruptly. He cleared his throat to whisper:

“Pardon my haste! You are——”

It broke off. With an effort she found her own voice. Speak she must!

"Yes; I am Miss St John."

She had even tried to smile. He was here; that was everything for the moment. And she was the last woman on earth to permit herself to dislike a man at first sight for any exterior reason.

"I am Miss St John. Mr Loder has been—— But you will know all later. You have only just heard?"

"Only just!" He whispered it thickly again. His eyes veered round for a glance at the rare old carved oak panelling here. "Saw it in a Toronto paper. I have travelled like the wind. I was stupefied. Mr Loder, you know, had disowned us completely. It was a struggle to span the gulf even at such a crisis, considering——"

"I understand!" Her hand went out on an impulse, as he paused to wipe something from his forehead. He was dreading the very ordeal that might mean so much to him! "You won't speak to him of that—you dare not—not tonight!" she said. "Whatever the past, he has suffered. He has moaned incessantly for you—would see no one else at all. Remember that! Go!—go to him at once. This way! Tell me afterwards, if you wish!"

Yes, he had hurried. Suspense had left damp and clammy the hand that gripped hers convulsively for that moment. He stumbled on up the stairs. No need to follow. Sister Judith stood waiting a little way down the corridor, as if bent upon her duty and nothing else. She beckoned.

"Just in time! I must warn you: be very careful, and call me if necessary. I shall be close at hand."

She held back the door. It was only in human nature, perhaps, that Wilfred Spurr should pause as in a sort of awe for a moment, staring around the room—a typical, old English room, stiff and strange to his eyes. She saw his jaws set hard, as upon an impulse to turn back even now. Then, like a man going to meet some unknown fate, he drew a breath, and strode across to the bed in the corner.

He drew back the curtains. He looked and looked. It was a full minute before his husky voice would sound.

“Mr Loder! Uncle! You wanted me, and I’m here. What is it you have to say to me? . . . You know me—or forget me? I have been to Mr Crewe, your solicitor, in Old Broad Street, and he sent me on here. Remember Toronto? I was there; I had never left it. I have come thousands of miles—for this moment!”

Staring down, he held his breath. Too late? He shook with the thought. And then—then, with an effort that seemed almost superhuman, Spartan Loder, man of mystery and a double life, was lifting himself upon one arm, and shading his eyes almost steadily to believe.

“Wilfred!” rattled in his throat. “You’re here? Bend closer—closer! I wouldn’t tell them—I’m all but blind. Blind, my boy, as you may be some day! And so you’ve seen him? You know all—all except the one thing—the old man’s secret!”

“I know nothing.” Spurr sank his voice, half eagerly, half defiantly. “Nothing except that my mother, your own sister, cursed you as she died. She said that you had deliberately, devilishly,

wrecked the lives of two men. But that's not for me to judge. I am not here to talk, I came to listen. What is it?"

Then the pause. Old Loder had sunk back. He made a second mighty effort and failed. Groping for the other's hand, he clutched it, drew him down, and glared so closely with the glazed, yet searching eyes, that Spurr held his breath like a man fascinated, hypnotised. Then at last the clutch relaxed.

"Ah! she told you that! And you believed it. It was never the advertisement that brought you here: it was a message from my brain across the seas! I knew—knew you would come to hear it; and I knew I should live to tell it. Now, listen to——"

"One moment!" Wiping his lips, Wilfred Spurr faced round. "Nurse, my Uncle Loder would prefer to speak with me quite in private, if you would——"

It trailed off. No one was standing there. In a startled way he tiptoed across, stared both ways along the quiet corridor, turned the key, and crept back across to the window. Fastened; and that drop of fully thirty feet to the grass lawn made it impossible for anyone below to hear a sound. Still not assured, he went stoopingly round the room and peered into every corner—shook every piece of drapery. Then he sprang back to the bedside. Those twitching yellow fingers were feeling out impotently for him.

"Here—here! Uncle, yes, I am listening! If there is anything heavy on your mind this night, that ought to be told——"

"Ay, there is. Closer! There is!—a million of money! More than that—far more! A solid million—and an endless silver mine! Keep still!" The listening man had thrown back his head with a little incredulous moan. "I mayn't talk long. You should have come sooner. Have cheated doctor all along; couldn't cheat myself!" came the strained gasps, with maddening halts as his breath whistled and failed. "Could tell everything that happened from the first—meant to—but too late. Sha'n't—sha'n't last the night out. Something told me that! . . .

"A million of money, all wasted to me—all so much iron weight about my neck! Mind, no one here knows a word. It's for you to take the secret from me, and lock it up, or you stand to lose in a moment all I've treasured for years. For your own sake! With my money, you take over my risk. Deadly risk! Maybe a pistol shot, or a stab in the dark—only Heaven knows. You'll lie awake o' nights; you'll see the sword hanging and the hair snapping—you may curse the inheritance. If not, promise you'll——"

"I promise—I tell you, I promise—I swear it!" the other breathed, his arms drawn up as with a suspense too tense to be endured. "What money? Where is it? If you'll only tell me that, and the story afterwards!"

And old Loder, glaring at him, palpably stifling an inward agony, poured out the series of gasps.

"The mine—the Nevada Silver Mine! I discovered it, but *he* was with me—your father that was to be! We kept our silence, saved money, bought the ground, and registered the title. We

dug in it for years, piling up this vast fortune, which I—which I transferred from bank to bank in other names without his knowledge. Then—then I got rid of your father's interest in the mine by a trick, and promised to pay him yearly sums to keep him quiet. He had married—secretly married—my only sister—mere blue-eyed baby! I never forgave her. . . . Listen! I never kept my compact with him, and have paid the price ever since: my haunted, ghost-ridden life here, shut out from society, fingers pointed at me wherever I go, faces watching to find out my secret! Listen! I took fear, and shut down the mine indefinitely, and came away secretly to England with the deeds. Those deeds prove everything: our legal right to work the property, and to vast proceeds accumulated in banks over there. He couldn't claim the mine—knew nothing of where the money was deposited. The deeds! I have them safe—safe where no one but you can find them; but never dared stir to use them. The fear had become my shadow—moved at my shoulder day and night. I'm known in London and New York; I'm watched for in both worlds! My own lawyer in London has only seen me twice—think of that! But you—you can win back all, if you're careful—if you don't fear the hanging sword. You hear me?"

"Every word—every syllable! Wait a second!" As if still unable to believe himself the sole participant in those tremendous revelations, he turned his damp face once more to stare into all the shadowy recesses. "Yes—yes! Go on!"

"Even my lawyer doesn't know this. Don't trust him now. Lawyers are held by the strongest

parties—can be bought body and soul by actual holders of those deeds. Possession ten-tenths of the law with them, everywhere! There's your danger. I haven't told you all! We—we had a partner at the outset—a man too dangerous to trick or offend; and the title-deeds stood in three names till, as you hear, I got rid of your mother's husband.

Two left! That other man's name was Manisty—Seth Manisty!—never forget it! I bought him out at an honest, enormous price, but he was a spendthrift—a gambler—going to live on his knowledge. He heard of fresh developments at the mine, and crept back there, with his son, to blackmail me. It was then I burned the gear, closed down the mine, and got away; he had sworn to knife me. I'm here, safe; they can never reach me in time now. But they are hunting me still; they mean to trace those deeds. Without them, they are powerless—no time to explain more! In a few years, mine and money escape them—go into the Intestate Courts over there! D'ye see? I never troubled to remove his name and partnership from the papers. Let them obtain the deeds and prove me legally dead, and they take all—all! To do that they had to encompass my death! Ah! it's all silence; it all sounds safe to you; they have pretended to be gone—baffled—dead! Don't trust appearances a moment! They are drawing the net nearer and nearer; working in the dark—villains—blacker than ever I was! Give them one clue, and they will ruin you—kill you. Wilfred, once put your hands on the deeds and the papers which tell you all I have not told, you'll never—never——”

"No—no! I swear faithfully to all you ask of me! The deeds—tell me, or it will be too late!"

"Ay, boy! Give me time for breath. Where's your hand? Must you tremble so? . . . My will is there with the deeds: all in one sealed package. Hide it; do nothing until you see your way clear. Your only plan, should you fear for your life, is to compound with those men—Manisty, father and son. Advertise in every 'personal' column. Make them an offer, if they will wait; and keep your word. But don't trust them with the papers a moment. They—they'll risk the rest. I've seen their faces peering at me, it seemed, round the cliff—from behind bushes. I've seen them in my dreams, creeping nearer—nearer—nearer! I've paid the price. It's for you to profit by the warning. Manisty!—the last man left!" You'll live to know that money—money buys everything on God's earth but happiness. What has it bought for me? This agony—death!"

He struggled up, a strange, reminiscent horror flickering in his eyes. He was pointing; pointing slowly along the walls, till Wilfred Spurr, fresh from the sweet summer air into this thick atmosphere of vain contrition and mouldering treasure, could bear no more. With a movement almost brutal, he caught at the hand and forced it back to a standstill.

"Stop this—stop this, or I'll go! I'll go as I came, if you can't trust me. The deeds!"

"The deeds—yes—now! . . . When—when my last breath goes, send for the minister and Doctor Lancing to witness. Go with them alone down into my library. Behind the Dutch clock on the

left: there's a hole in the wall. I scooped out the brick, bit by bit, for fear of a noise—then I put back the square of panelling. Don't—you hurt me, boy! . . . Just behind the pendulum space you'll find it: a flat tin box, wrapped in cloth. Open the clock door, feel for the square hole cut in the woodwork at the back, push at the panel, and you have them. Two papers! One tells you where I have placed my will and the deeds—the other will take you to them!”

“Behind the clock! Behind the library clock!” Standing back stiffly, as if in doubt of its reality, Wilfred Spurr repeated the words. “And that is all?”

“All! You are the son of your father—and my sister. I have left everything to you, as conscience money—on one condition!”

“And that?” he breathed, staring into space.

“One binding condition. I thought it all out. I want you—command you—to marry that girl, Sheba, and be a man to her! Keep ever an arm between her and the world. Never forget that I—that I owe to Sheba the few gleams of sunlight in my later life. Can't tell all; but I found her in London there, starving and deserted: I brought her here; call it my one great action in life—call it what you will! A precious, clinging child, budded now into a dear woman, worth more than all the money! Don't break her full little heart—one sneer would do that, once I'm gone. Don't let her drift back on the world, which brands her 'adventuress.' In my will—no more breath!—you'll find it all written. . . . No—no! Come back—not yet! Not till I'm gone. Be a man!

Where's your hand again? Let me hold it! Wait!" His eyes closed. The breath was coming more evenly, more faintly, now. His jaws were relaxing. To one who could read signs, those signs were eloquent.

"You're frightened—shaking! All life before you, boy! You're rich; and you'll take my girl—my Sheba! Never let her know of my life. You'll love her for herself alone—I don't fear that. And there's Mrs Saxon, and other faithful creatures whom I must. . . . Yes, in flat tin box you'll find. . . ."

That was all. The prolonged effort had brought its inevitable reaction. There might be more to tell, but it would remain unspoken for ever. And of a sudden Wilfred Spurr seemed to realise. He twisted his fingers free, and sprang noiselessly back, staring, breathless.

Not a sound! Nothing save the rattle of Spartan Loder's chest, like the drain of water down some distant pebble beach.

The hand of Time seemed to have swung up to call a halt.

Back silently he moved as far as the dressing-table. He gave one last look at the figure beyond the curtains, as his shaking hand felt for the wick-wheel of the lamp. In his eyes flamed a strange light—like the sickly, nameless dread of the gambler throwing down his last stake.

More light?—was that all he wished? If so his fingers played him a trick. The lamplight flickered uncertainly, and then went almost out. Wilfred Spurr's bending shape shot out of sight as swiftly as does a shadow cast upon a bioscopic sheet.

A silence—a complete blank for maybe a score of seconds—not more.

Then the light flared up again. A ghastly grey hue under his olive-dark skin, Spartan Loder's nephew stood and listened, as if that brief blank had struck terror of the unknown to his soul. Still no sound—all was as before. He moved to the door, turned the key, and looked out. No one in sight; and only the faintest hum of voices from somewhere in the depths of the great house.

Which way must he turn for the main staircase? There were two—one at either end. Yes—yes, it was the one to the right. He remembered now.

Squaring his shoulders, gripping his teeth together as for the supreme finality, he strode along the carpeted corridor and down the staircase.

CHAPTER VI

UP over the sea and the woods a clear, glorious moon had just swung like a questioning eye. It threw quivering patches of silver lacework across the lawn. It steeped in soft light Sheba's figure, motionless there on the gravel sweep.

She was waiting; waiting for something to which she could give no name. She had lost touch with actuality that night. She seemed to be moving in a mist. She knew simply that Mrs Saxon had touched her arm, whispered something anxiously, and pointed to the open hall door. All the world around seemed to be waiting and listening with her.

Her trembling had passed. She could look calmly all about her—anywhere but up at the windows of that northern corridor. She might never see Felcote and the Manor House again just as they looked to-night. Everything that Mr Loder had touched or noticed stood out now with compelling significance. Love? No—no; not that! Not the love that a man asks of a woman!

There was the sun-dial that he had pronounced more wonderful and trustworthy than any clock in creation. There was the boxwood border that he had designed—a square rampart of dark green studded every here and there with some grotesque protuberance. And away behind, at the end of

the lawn, lay the entrance to his privet maze—that work of monumental patience and ingenuity which had cost two whole years to construct and four more to mature. Anyone was at liberty now to try the paths, he had said; but he did not guarantee a safe exit; and no words from his lips could have been more effective in causing the household to give it a wide berth. To Sheba its mystery had never appealed. She had intuitively divined his real thoughts—and that was enough.

She was moving mechanically down the drive. Someone had lit the red lamps over the lodge gates, and it showed her the now almost inevitable knot of watchers bunched there to speculate in whispers, and await the latest item of news. The dying man's rugged personality had thrown a halo of fascination about him which no ordinary popularity could have won him. Quite possibly, too, the recollection suddenly thrilled through Sheba, news of the latest development had already flown on wings. It had! Just as she turned, a low basket-chaise had rolled rapidly round the bend. The pony reared; the crowd melted reluctantly back. Sheba realised, and shrank; but it was a moment too late—as the owner of that bell-like, delicate voice meant it to be.

“Blanche, look!” it rang out through the stillness. “The coincidence of it—when her name was upon our lips! Miss St John!—Sheba! Darling, what is it?—your face is like marble in this moonlight. We cannot rest—all these reports flying about!”

“Is that so?” Sheba said, steadily. That was all. She stood calm, almost cold in her queenliness.

Until just lately the Barringtons of the Hall had driven by in freezing silence. The master of the Manor House himself had returned it with his inscrutable stare; hence they had perforce to revenge themselves in covert sneers and hints levelled at his ward. And a woman's tongue may cut more deeply than any knife.

They were strikingly alike, these two sisters—both tall, imperious, with red-brown eyes and coiled masses of chestnut hair. But it was Carlotta who had the ready tongue and silver voice, and Blanche who tittered icily at her sister's barbed sallies. It was Carlotta who leaned out with the concentrated, pitying breath.

"Believe me, dear, you have our utter sympathy this night. Nothing so cruelly unexpected could ever have happened yet! We have just heard: our groom was at the railway station, and saw him drive up here in the fly at a breakneck gallop. It made me shudder. I detest foreigners of every sort—one nearly persuaded me to marry him once. It reads more like the last page of a novel; the shock must have been ghastly. What can you do? What do they think will happen?" A pause. She turned to Blanche with the audible whisper: "She doesn't see my meaning!"

"I do not." Sheba's pale lips did not tremble. She did not seem to have heard all. "Of whom are you speaking?"

"Sheba, dear! It is known all over the place by now. We can't help realising—on your account! Whatever can he be like? Some say he was fatefully dark and sardonic; some are saying exactly the reverse. You could not stay in the house?

Of course, you will hardly—I mean as a self-respecting woman with a reputation to guard above all things, you will not dare to remain there a minute longer than is absolutely necessary. Of course!”

And Sheba caught her breath sharply. They watched intently. She would give a moan—the unnatural calm would fall away from her! They saw a faint smile dawn, instead. They mentally set her down as an actress of genius unsuspected until to-night—too clever to betray her woman’s thoughts. Carlotta could have cut at her with the whip as she stood there so still, and hid the fact with a caressing little laugh.

“So glad you didn’t do anything tragic or precipitate, dear! We fully expected to hear that you drove away from the place as *he* entered it. So many women of spirit and pride in your place would feel that fate had dealt them a shameful blow. Just think! One hour ago, one might say, you had every reasonable expectation of being a rich woman for life. Now, with all due respect for poor Mr Loder’s eccentricities, you can scarcely anticipate more than a bequest of a hundred or so—can you, dear?”

Still no answer. The full, pansy-soft eyes looked past them, seeming to see something in the blue-black haze that no one else could see. Carlotta picked out another venomed arrow from her store.

“I was half in hopes we might be in time to catch a glimpse of him—on your account. I can generally read a man at a glance. Is he *really* a nephew? You know what the world is! Is he—is he up there with Mr Loder now? Does Doctor

Lancing know? To think of his springing to life in the very last hour! Your awkward position this night, too! In your place, I should feel like refusing to see him. *Shall* you do that? Whatever will you answer when he says: 'Well, Miss St John, I'm awfully cut up, but the house must be sold'—or something like that? Because he is sure to turn out a melodramatic spendthrift of a man. The Loder blood is in him!"

A silence. Then Sheba stirred. "Is that all you came to say?" she asked, in a quiet little voice. "If so, I'll wish you 'good-night.'"

The red-brown eyes flamed. For a moment it looked as if the curling whip must swish down. But there were more days—more developments—better opportunities—to dawn yet. Carlotta Barington recollected it. Her pony's back took the cut. Rich and bell-like her laugh trilled out, as the low chaise rolled away.

"Good-night, darling! Good-night—and perhaps good-bye, eh? So sorry!"

Sheba moved back slowly down the avenue, scanned the windows, and saw that all seemed tranquil still. Not yet!

Someone had fastened the hall door; but the drawing-room French windows stood ajar. She entered by that way. She had a hazy idea of going straight to her own rooms and putting her boxes in order, so that the hour to come might not find her unprepared. It faded from her mind at sight of Mrs Saxon's figure standing guard at the doorway opposite. The housekeeper stole in, a finger to her lips.

"What—what——" Sheba began in a whisper.

"Hush, dearie! I was waiting for you. The gentleman has not come down yet; there has not been a sound. But Judith Cottrell is there. Now, keep quite calm! It just struck me that, at such a time, we ought to have sent someone off for Doctor Lancing. He was to call again before ten o'clock; but certainly, seeing what has happened, he ought to know and to be—— What was that?"

She had heard nothing. It was the queer fact that the hanging light in the hall had suddenly dipped down to a mere glimmer, as if fanned by a puff of wind. Mrs Saxon stared at the darkness a moment, and then swept out to investigate.

"That is something more than strange," her subdued voice came back to Sheba presently. "This door is not open. It looks—it looks as if someone had deliberately turned down the light. Wait a moment; I'll soon see whether . . . there, I can't tell one way or the other—I have been and put it right out! Matches and tapers—where did I leave them?"

Sheba scarcely followed the detail. She had sunk down at the table; her mind would inevitably swing back to the scene at Spartan Loder's bedside. It might have been one minute or five before the hall resumed its normal glow, and Mrs Saxon's breath beat against her cheek.

"Miss Sheba, what do you make of it? I would not cry out, but I feel certain someone stood back in the passage to let me pass. But I know it—I flung out my hands and felt something glide away—I touched either a coat or a dress. I don't like it—I don't understand it!" she insisted, turning back for the door. "If I knew who had played

such a prying trick, I would know why; and I will!"

She swerved suddenly back, and caught Sheba's hand, to press it encouragingly. All else was forgotten.

"Quick, dearie! Here he is, coming down. He looks scared. Oh! I trust there's nothing that we—— What am I saying? Be quite brave and collected—now we shall know all!"

Spartan Loder's nephew came hastily down, leaped the last three stairs, and drew up dead, staring through the drawing-room doorway opposite.

At the table in there he saw a girl sitting motionless, one hand pressed to the row of pearls at her slim throat, her wide eyes shining out a question to him that her voice could not sound. It was the same slight, delicate figure of a woman that he had passed on the first landing. And Mrs Saxon, stately in her black silks, stood with one hand upon that girl's shoulder—as if both simply waited for something that must happen.

What was it? He did not speak—did not attempt another step. There was a strange dilation of his eyes that showed the white rim around their pupils—and a far stranger suggestion of horror or paralysis in his attitude. Twice his lips parted, but soundlessly. What was it?

Mrs Saxon hardly knew that she was moving forward. The vaguest instinct made her close the door behind her.

"Yes?" was all she could say to break that spell. And he gasped something.

"The—the library!" it sounded like. No one could have been certain.

"You want me—or Miss St John?" she queried. "You think—you think there is no hope of a to-morrow?" she breathed, imploringly, as his face turned from her. "Oh, speak, Mr Spurr!"

"I fear there is none," he said, speaking with thick, staccato notes. "Send off for his medical man as soon—as soon as I can leave him. For the moment he will let no one disturb him. The—the library—quick! Somewhere down here, he said. I—I am to take him a paper."

"Yes, sir—yes! There it is—fourth door down there, on the left. One moment; there is no light. If you——"

"Let me go! Every moment is precious!" He had snatched the lit taper from her hands. She could hear the panting of his chest, as if he had run far and fast. "I know—I can get all that he wants!"

"You don't mean us to think——" she began, falteringly. His teeth had clicked; he waved her back almost fiercely.

"I tell you he is bad—you all knew it! Send for his doctor—do anything you think fit. See to him—never mind me!"

He stumbled on down the passage. He had reached that fourth door on the left. And there he paused, as if in physical collapse—or as if the brass handle had sent an electric current shuddering through him. What was it? Once more Mrs Saxon turned, as if she had felt the shock, too. His husky, muffled shout was hardly recognisable as the voice of a man.

"It's locked—this door's locked, I say! The key—where is it? For God's sake, answer! Damn you! The key—*the key!*"

It was never answered. There came a thud of hoofs—a rattle of wheels—over the gravel sweep outside there. It was just as that voice rose almost to a delirious scream—"The key! Curse you, the key!"—that someone leaped from a vehicle outside, fumbled for the bell, and pulled it with a force that sent echoes jangling throughout the quiet house. Quiet? No; in that next moment the four walls seemed full of confused, chaotic sound.

"Miss St John! Miss Sheba!" the housekeeper's cry suddenly thrilled out.

As with a prescience she had run to the door and flung it open. A man sprang past her into the hall—a man with fine dark, keen eyes, curling beard, an olive-brown complexion, a sombrero-like hat, and a fur-trimmed travelling ulster.

"Thank God—at last!" he said breathlessly. "I lost my only train—drove from the other town. You know me? Ay, I'm . . ."

He paused. She had shivered back from him, dumb, a hand to her eyes. Sheba, at sound of that strong, fearless voice, had stepped slowly out. A crowd of the servants were huddled at the far end of the passage. He stared from one face to another.

"Why, what is the matter? You don't mean—surely you won't tell me that Mr Loder is gone!"

And still they gazed at him as at something risen from the dead. He strode forward—to find Mrs Saxon's arm put out like a bar.

"*You* are the gentleman!" She had come to herself. She could whisper it with determined incredulity. "You take that name—you? How can that be? He has been—you have been! It is all over; he has seen Mr Loder. He—he is in the library—down there—*now!*"

"Now?" Almost a smile passed over the dark face. He turned appealingly to Sheba, as if instinctively gauging her position here. "Will you enlighten me? Who is he?—where is he? I have but just reached Barrowdene, from Canada, and driven straight here. Ask this man—the driver!"

She could not move. She heard his voice—she saw a flesh-and-blood man—but no word would pass the congealed fear in her throat. She had already spoken with this same man—on the stairs. She had held his hand. And yet—and yet——

Mrs Saxon had turned and was pointing down the passage. It seemed but a tick of the clock that had elapsed, but that other man—the man who had been feverishly rattling the door handle—was not there. He had vanished. And this one, his physical duplicate in all but the pained voice and expression, stood here as in a dream of amazement.

Vanished! With a great effort Mrs Saxon went slowly down the passage, and looked.

The library door was still locked, and no key was there. But the door next to it—that of the dining-room—stood wide open. Peering through, she made out the balcony windows beyond swung open to the night. And that was all.

An indefinable awe trickled along Mrs Saxon's perfect nerves. She caught up her skirt, swept

back to the hall, and faced the man with shuddering challenge.

"Speak! End this—let us know! *You* are the gentleman? Do you tell us, before heaven, you have come to——"

"My dear lady!" he breathed, in the pause. "I don't understand a word. I know nothing. You do not—you surely do not suggest——"

"Hush! Don't say it!" She put up her hand, and looked back at that fourth door. "God forgive me, but there's something devilish here—something never to be explained. You have been—you have had word with Mr Loder—and gone again. You took the taper from my own hand. I opened this door to you myself—I saw you come down that stair. And Miss Sheba here——"

She could go no further. Words seemed grotesque, meaningless. No one had stirred, when the silence was broken by that faint, dull cry from overhead.

"Quick! quick!"

Judith Cottrell's voice, from the northern corridor. They were stumbling up. Unbidden, involuntarily, he was following close behind.

The door of Spartan Loder's room was wide open. The mystery of that life was snatched from the world now. Another, a deeper, mystery had taken its place, and Spartan Loder had gone silently to solve it.

Sister Judith had been stooping between the curtains. She turned a face quite composed, save for a twitching of the lips.

"Yes, gone," she said, "Quite gone! Where is the doctor?"

No one answered. No one could. She went on quietly.

"They wished to be left to themselves—he and the gentleman here, his nephew. I went to my room. I have just come back—to find life gone."

She stepped back, as the man came slowly, dazedly forward. He looked; he placed one hand reverently upon the dead man's forehead; he had closed his eyes. There was an unmeasured span of silence. Then he turned to them, with a stern, different voice.

"He is dead; but I live. Is there anyone to help me—anyone I can send for the police?"

No reply. He stood looking from face to face. He drew in a sharp breath, and was striding from the room, when that low, piteous cry checked him.

"Not that—not to-night! Oh, be merciful! Don't let them come—not to-night!"

He turned, the quickest to realise, and put out his arms just in time. He looked down into the pale face, with its rigid, unconscious sweetness. He could remember her name, as he lifted her gently into the chair at hand.

"Miss Sheba has fainted. Stay here with her—say nothing to anyone," he whispered to the house-keeper. "Trust me—all of you—that is all I ask."

He hurried out. The servants scattered as he leaped down the stairs. He saw no one, and strode across to the hall door. The driver of the four-wheeler, just lighting his pipe, started as his arm was gripped as in a vice.

"Yes, you! Answer me: did you see anybody—any man running either way as you drew up here? . . . Think hard!—it must have been in

that very moment. A man something like myself. I'll give you ten pounds to-night if you can lay your hands on him. He can't have gone far. Ten—twenty!"

And the man simply stared down. He had heard without grasping a syllable; his eyes showed it.

With some deep word, almost a groan of helplessness, the other swung his arm away and sprang out on to the lawn. He stood, eyes and ears strained. Not a sound—not the stir of a leaf. The cold moonlight lit up the grounds in almost every direction. To and fro he ran, his feet now clattering over the pebbles, now sinking into the grass. Now he was lost to sight, to reappear presently round the farther wall. He had made a panting circuit of the house and stables; and perhaps that brief survey had been sufficient to show him that there was nothing to be done in that way. His surge of suppressed excitement had died quite down.

"My mistake!" he said, as he took out some coins. "Thanks—good-night!" And the pondering cabman drove away.

"That warn't drink," he told himself. "If drink 'ud do that, this 'un wouldn't touch another drop."

The hall door had been closed. The new-comer had gone mechanically up the stairs and found his way back to the room in the northern corridor. Not one of the three women seemed to have moved or breathed.

He held the door, and faced them. His voice, determined and deep, had a ring that could never be mistaken.

"I have failed. I can find no one," he said. "I take it that we all wish to face this situation with the calm courage it asks. Let me know at once how I stand. Put it plainly. A man has been here, calling himself by that name, and has taken down the last words from these dead lips? Thank you! Then, that man, whoever he be, has personated myself with a motive which I make it my life's work to find out. *I am Wilfred Spurr!*"

CHAPTER VII

TO one woman, at least, the last few hours of that fateful day were as hours lost from her life.

To stand powerless there and look down at the stony, mask-like face on the pillow, to tell herself that only a hundred brief minutes had ticked by since she had knelt and listened for his voice, to believe that she was merely watching a shape of cold clay—no ; it seemed too terrible to be real.

“He is not dead ! Not dead !” she kept whispering unconsciously.

There was a mercy in the curtain of mental mist which seemed to halo everything around her. It left her unable to realise ; it shut off all the vague horror of what lay behind that night's crisis. She knew that the others were glancing at her, and away again, as if there were something in her eyes which they did not wish to read. She knew that her arm had been touched, and that one man had been moved to speak in spite of himself.

“You'll bear it, Miss St John—bear it like a true woman !” he said, in his quiet, compelling way. “If tears are sent for our good, why, let the tears come !”

She looked at him piteously, and then shrank. It was the man who had passed her on that staircase, and had held her hand so convulsively, and yet it was not. The bare, ineffaceable memory of it numbed all thought of tears.

And then—then she heard another voice—cool, measured, tinged with irony. Now she understood why they had all been waiting in silence. She moved instinctively aside, to make way for Doctor Gilbert Lancing.

“Hold the lamp a little higher, Mrs Saxon, just so! Yes—yes, that will do.”

A moment's cursory examination sufficed him. He had let the curtains fall, and was drawing on his gloves. No one could be surprised, he was saying; the truth might now as well be told. Spartan Loder had only died as he had lived, an eccentric, self-willed man, who paid cynically for medical advice that he never meant to follow, and had apparently made up his mind to leave the world so soon as he had come face to face with his missing nephew.

He turned with a bow to Wilfred Spurr. He had heard nothing as yet of that night's deeper drama.

“While congratulating this gentleman upon his narrow margin, I am bound to tell him that this has been the most singular, most unsatisfactory, case in my experience. Nurse Cottrell, I think, will agree that skill and medicine were useless with a patient of such a temperament!”

She heard Sister Judith acquiesce in that composed, lifeless voice of hers. She looked around at them, her heart swelling with an indignation that could find no expression. All ended! Yes, Doctor Lancing had buttoned his frock-coat. He had paused to look back at her with a meaning expression, as if he would have said “Remember!” Behind him, watching her, too, was the calm grey

figure of Sister Judith. *Her rôle*, too, was played and ended now; that curious suggestion of a smile in her eyes could only mean satisfaction in the thought that another woman was in the same position as herself. As Gilbert Lancing stepped out, the grey figure slipped after him into the corridor.

It had been like watching a play in which she had no part. She was forgotten. She felt that deathly faintness creeping over her again. Just as she turned to grope for the door she was caught back to reality in a strange way. She had heard a quick stumble. She found her cold hands gripped by two powerful, warm ones.

"One moment. You shrank from me. You shall tell me why. You shall tell me why, or I cannot remain in this house to-night!"

The thrill of it seemed to sweep her off her feet. She could only look back into the dark, resolute face with dilated eyes that shone like the windows of a firelit room. He had waited this moment; he had asked Mrs Saxon to slip past; he would never let her go until she had answered him. Till now he had quite sunk his own crushing trouble, standing back in respect for the grief that he could not be expected to share. But now he held her, as if he had divined all, and meant her to realise the nameless difference between his handclasp and the clammy grip of that other man, the masquerader who had got ahead of him by a margin of minutes.

"Yes, look at me!" he whispered. "Read the truth at once, if you can. Let me know what I am in your thoughts. The night cannot pass

with that shadow of doubt between us all. I am paralysed—I can do nothing—until I know. . . . Now! You trust me? You, at least, have no further misgiving as to my right to stand here?”

“None!” It left her lips on a sudden impulse that she could never have explained. “None!” she repeated, almost firmly. “I trust you. I must!” And the muscular hands tightened upon hers.

“Thank God! But for that, I could not have stayed here another moment. You need sleep; you must have it—deep, untroubled sleep! You give me full permission to act from now as Mr Loder’s sole surviving relation? Don’t be afraid to think! If the faintest fear of my *bona fides* makes you prefer that I bring you the solid proofs——”

“No, no; I want no more!” She tried to smile up, but he had felt the little shudder, and could understand. The conviction that he was Spartan Loder’s nephew only served to surround that other man’s personality with the more abiding horror. “Don’t let me think of it yet—I mustn’t hope to understand it! Yes, do just as you think wisest for all; and if I can help you in any way, tell me. For the moment, you are best without me—a weak, frightened woman! Thank heaven—thank heaven you are here!”

It came with a warning sob. One arm circled protectively about her he drew open the door. Mrs Saxon stood waiting there.

“Take care of her!” he whispered. “Has she a maid?”

“No; she would never let Mr Loder go to that

expense for her. But I can look after our Miss Sheba! You shall hear all the story afterwards, sir. Come, dearie, lean on me; it's all right; you've borne as much to-day as could be asked of any woman of twice your strength!"

A minute later Sheba had fallen across the bed in her own room. One great tremor ran through her, and then she lay quite still. It looked to be something deeper than sleep. It scared Mrs Saxon, hovering breathlessly over her. She suddenly hurried out and down the stair.

At the foot she came face to face with Sister Judith Cottrell.

"Doctor Lancing! Quick! Has he gone?" And Sister Judith started.

"For Miss St John? Ah, she has broken down, has she? Does she expect me to play the nurse again?" flashed the strange reply from her lips.

Mrs Saxon did not catch it. She had caught sight of the doctor's tall shadow wavering out there on the moonlit drive.

For a breathing space Judith Cottrell's grey eyes watched. Then she was flitting up the stairs and along a branch corridor. Noiselessly she pushed inwards the door of Sheba's room. Now she had glided inside. The barest minute she allowed herself—just time enough to crane over the still figure, and to draw back with that sharp hiss of her breath.

"Brain!" Her long, white fingers strained together. "Brain! My God! Is fate at work in this?"

Doctor Lancing was just springing into his throbbing car as the housekeeper ran forward.

"Who? Miss St John herself? Never!" She could not see the look that swept his face as he leaped down.

A swift nod, an expression of deepest concern, and he was hurrying back with her into the house. "I think I know, but I hope I'm mistaken. I watched her, too. These overstrung temperaments will stand a great deal, but when the strain reaches a certain point—they snap like a violin string. Where is she? Don't be alarmed!"

They paused at the open door. "No; she has not stirred," Mrs Saxon breathed. He was holding her back.

"'Sh! No need whatever to disturb her. You did the right thing to tell me quietly and at once. Keep still!"

He tiptoed across. The prone figure gave no sign. He saw it at a glance: the reaction had numbed her brain and left her as though lulled by the spell of a hypnotist. It was safe to let his hand rest lightly upon the pallid brow—to pass it softly downward over her eyes. If she knew! But she never would.

It seemed a long time before he tiptoed across again.

"You must prepare yourself for a little more suspense, Mrs Saxon. Now, just do as I direct you, and all will be well. For the next forty-eight hours, nothing but sleep! Sleep at any cost! Let no one see or speak to her. Whatever happens, whatever has to be done, Miss St John is not to leave her room for at least a week. You understand?"

"A week!" She echoed it, aghast. "But—think! Impossible!"

"Then I will not be responsible for her! Mr Loder's nephew is here; he can do all necessary—in fact, I will see him myself, and tell him he must. One week! If she demurs, and considers herself able to disobey, you may look for a further and more serious collapse. You must exercise a discreet authority. One week! And after that, a complete change of air, away from all these associations."

"I'll do my utmost." Mrs Saxon put a hand to her eyes. All the immediate future seemed crimson with foreboding. "In that case, I can only ask Sister Judith——"

"No!" He took a step nearer the door, and looked out. "No!" he answered emphatically. "She may be wanted elsewhere at any moment. You can do all that is required, with one of the maids to help. I will send down some soothing draughts early to-morrow. Let me see—yes! Find Sister Judith and ask her to give you—no, never mind—you will find it easily yourself. In Mr Loder's room—a little green phial on the side-board. Bring that, and some water."

Overwhelmed, she obeyed. For that moment he was left alone with the woman whom he had thrice fought desperately to make his own—and thrice lost. Hands clenched stiffly at his side, as if to master the impulse to throw them around her, he stooped again. Nearer—nearer—until his lips could all but brush the bloom of her cheek.

"I shall win!" came slowly through his teeth.

"You hate me now, Sheba—you shall weep for me yet!"

Mrs Saxon was back. She was not to see that his hands shook for once, as he carefully measured and mixed his draught. He stood back.

"Lift her head; get her to take that! See that she does—every drop! She need not see me—need not know what it is. Let her drift off again. . . . You are quite sure? It will work wonders. Now! A silk or lace handkerchief and the Eau de Cologne!"

Quickly, dexterously, he sprayed the silk square and let it fall over the sweet wan face as lightly as a breath of summer wind.

A little later, when Mrs Saxon stole in again to make sure, the spell had worked: Sheba slept as deeply, as evenly, as a child. A little break in the series of thrills had come. And now?

Sheba knew nothing. It was left to Mrs Saxon to act for her. And her first woman's duty was—to find Mr Loder's nephew, hear what he had to tell, and then place the keys of the household in his hands. Until that mystery was nailed down all life remained a blank.

She rustled once more quietly down the staircase. She had never seemed more stately, more conscious that the weight of responsibility rested entirely upon herself for the moment. It was nearly ten o'clock, but time counted for nothing now. She pushed open the drawing-room door—then the dining-room. He was not in either apartment. She rang the bell, and questioned the servants; but they could tell her nothing. Mr Wilfred Spurr was not in the house.

CHAPTER VIII

JUST fifteen minutes earlier, Mr Loder's nephew, pacing the deserted passages, had found himself back in that northern corridor. He turned the handle of a door, went in, and drew back with a sharp breath of realisation. He had made a mistake. It was not his uncle's room.

A woman was kneeling there in the corner beside an open trunk. She faced round with a half-stifled little cry, and swayed to her feet.

"I beg your pardon, most sincerely!" he said. For a moment he thought he had seen a hunted, tigerish expression of resentment in those grey eyes. If so, it had faded swiftly, and left a calm smile.

"You need not!" She had moved towards him, a tall, self-possessed figure in grey. A totally different woman from the one they called Miss Sheba—a woman who seemed able to search his mind as he stood irresolutely there. "You need not! I am the nurse—Sister Judith Cottrell. I know enough of life to know what you must feel to-night. Any true woman would pity your position, and would wish to help you—even if she could not say so."

"Yes," he whispered, looking away. He recalled her now, as she had stood at Mr Loder's bedside. She was the nurse—and yet, somehow, her steady, fathomless eyes had an effect upon him

even at such a moment that he could not understand. To bow his apology and then turn away seemed easy ; and yet it was hard.

"*Can* I help you?"

As if determined to say it, she had put a hand upon his arm.

"I was thinking of it all at that very moment," she went on. "No one here seems to have a grain of nerve left. You cannot wonder ; such a shock is the shock of a lifetime. You do not think me unwomanly to speak so?"

"No—no! I am almost too bewildered to think of anything. I have no theory—nothing to work upon ; I know simply what you know. And I may never know anything more."

"Don't say that!" She drew him close, as if hardly knowing it. "You are not that sort of man. You will never rest until you have him at your feet—the man who could do you such a shameful wrong as that! Why did you hesitate because Miss St John was weak enough to think only of herself? There was no train by which he could have got away before morning. In your place, I should have searched the neighbourhood before midnight. At least, I should have gone over every inch of the house grounds!"

"They are strange to me," he said. "I had no one to turn to ; I was in a false position."

"You can turn to me!" She whispered it quite calmly, quite naturally. The fathomless eyes, so close to his own just then, seemed to expand and expand. "While I am here, you can turn to me. I can say no more."

She turned away, and stood as if waiting for

his burst of confidence. But something had checked it in his throat. With a grave, courteous "Thank you, Miss Cottrell!" he had passed out. He was never to know that she waited for his footsteps to die away, and then lifted her long white arms as in a slow ecstasy, something between a sob and a delirious laugh in her throat.

"Sheba! No, not Sheba—not yet! Not all the glory of money and man's love for Sheba St John!"

It might have been a sudden desire for the fresh air, or something in Judith Cottrell's last words that had set his blood tingling afresh with the longing to *know*, which made Spurr stride from the house and click the hall door behind him. To do what? He had not the faintest notion. The black wall of night rose up about him on every hand, only intensified by the moonlight and a blotch of saffron glow still going up from the furnaces at Barrowdene. He had that day jostled his way through the roar and whirl of London. To stand here was like standing in the hush of some vast old cathedral, awed by a sense of eternity.

Somewhere, perhaps within a few miles of him at this moment, was the man who had entered that doorway as himself. And he had done nothing! He had let the vital thread slip from his grasp. A woman's white, imploring face had numbed his first surge of righteous passion. It was as if the flood tide of opportunity had drained away and left him stranded.

Which way lay Felcote? He had taken a few steps down the drive, and then turned again, with

a half-smile to himself. By now, little doubt, the news was common property. He would find himself the centre of an attraction unbearable just now.

His eyes had been trained to darkness. He made out a path, and calculated that it would take him at an angle across the park-land out into the station road. He struck along it, halting now and then to listen, or to draw in one more deep breath of this wonderful, milk-warm air. If nothing else, it helped him to realise that he was moving in sane wakefulness, and not dreaming it all in the train flying across the Canadian plains.

He could see the road now. He could see the lights of some vehicle that did not appear to move—strong, white lights. And then something else riveted his attention. Just on his right lay a belt of firs, their conical tops standing out against the star-gemmed sky. Down on the level there was a pin-prick of light, that seemed to swerve slowly, to vanish, and then was glowing out redly again. Born with the faculty of analysis, he watched it until he knew. It was the burning tip of a cigar, ever and anon taken from some man's lips. It mattered nothing at such a time, and yet, presumably, his uncle's grounds had been labelled "Private." He strolled that way over the deadening grass. No, it could mean nothing; and yet a little sensation ran along his nerves as he got near enough to hear the boom of the man's voice—contemptuous, studied, with now and then an impatient laugh. Did he know it at all? Yes—no—he could not be certain.

Everything seemed to justify his sudden de-

termination to see the man's face. He tiptoed on, until his hand closed upon the straight stem of the first fir. He could make out nothing now: the fan-like boughs formed a thick screen; but he was within a few yards of them. And it sounded as if the listening woman had swung the cigar from the man's lips.

"You coward—you veneered villain!" she had said, in a dull, passionless voice that carried its own especial thrill. "You are both; and you have made me the same. I can do it—yes, to rid you of an incubus—to let you sleep even more easily than you do. I can even have the money, if by so doing I make your way clearer. Yes! But don't be sure. He is not a man to be fooled and fascinated; and, if I fail, I am not the woman to stand back crushed while you——"

"Bah! Do what you like—go to hell! Come here! If you play the Delilah with me now—if you let one breath of this reach the ears——"

It broke off. There was a dull, defiant moan. Spurr dashed back the branches and crashed through on an impulse not to be resisted.

"Who is it?—who is there?" he demanded, sternly.

For the instant all was blind obscurity. He had not even seen the flash of a woman's skirt—had heard only the snapping of twigs and the crack of the pine-needles underfoot. He bent, staring between the sentinel-like lines of trees, sure that he must be almost within touching distance of the man who could play upon a woman's weakness. Then—then he sprang. He had seen something crouching away in a stooping posture.

It twisted up convulsively. It was a man's figure—that was all he knew in that whirling moment. An arm clamped his knees as he shot out to grasp it. He went down, the base of his skull thudding against a sawn stump. He struggled up, a noise as of roaring waters in his ears. He seemed blinded. Before he fairly realised that the blow had crushed the hat-rim over his eyes he felt the same arm grip him from behind. Blows from a ringed, clenched hand were raining upon his right temple. As he dashed back his head the man gave a moan of agony, grappled for a hold upon his throat, got it, and dragged him backwards as for a throw that should end all.

Murder—murder out here in the lonely plantation belt? Spurr hardly realised yet that a blow had been struck—the swiftness of it all in that deep obscurity left it incredible—he had been prepared for nothing so sinister and definite. His breath was coming in quick gasps; he stared into the red mist of death—death by suffocation.

A brief, tentative pause now. Their panting figures swayed together uncertainly. The hands clamped Spurr's throat as tightly as ever, but the man who owned the grip was afraid—afraid to release or to kill. And Spurr was strong; he had lived a careful life from a man's point of view; the surprise over, all his manhood and muscle rose against the odds and the man who could calmly terrorise a woman. He suddenly hurled himself backward.

Their bodies crashed and rolled over the pine-needles. More slowly—more slowly—now almost inertly. Nothing had been gained by superior

strength ; the fingers of the unknown man retained their hold with nervous, terrible tenacity. The pheasants screeched in the trees about them ; the still plantation seemed alive with sound, as Spurr set his teeth and concentrated his faculties for a last effort that could not, should not, fail. He was ready ; he knew that the clutching man was limp and exhausted ; he had gathered his limbs together for the twist when—crash !

A deadening blow had been dealt at his head. A heavy blow—although both of his assailant's hands were fettered by that grip. Heaven and earth seemed to come together. With a mighty effort he struggled up out of the threatening oblivion, groped forward into the moonlight, saw a man's figure racing dimly ahead of him, staggered unsteadily in pursuit for about a hundred yards, tried to shout, tottered—and fell forward.

“Speak ! Speak to me ! Mr Spurr !”

It was a quiet, unflurried voice that seemed to come as from another world. He lay still, unable to open his eyes or to answer. A sick lethargy held him. How long he had lain so he might never know,

“But what is it ? What has happened ? Trust me !—you know Sister Judith Cottrell ? Surely !”

The subdued voice, trained in the sickroom, came a little more clearly. He could realise that his hand was held between hers, and that she had tried to open and perhaps to chafe it. Not for another moment did he know that his fingers were tightly clenched upon a broken fragment of gold watch chain.

“Lie quite still !” she said, passing her cool

hand over his forehead. He obeyed. There was something hypnotic again in the mere movement—in the very stillness of her kneeling attitude. It was Judith Cottrell—the woman whose door he had opened in error—here! She bent yet lower, to look closely. “You almost frightened me—me!” she whispered. “I have seen a strong man taken by a fit before, but never in that way—never so strangely. Why, don’t you know? You looked to be running; you toppled forward; you have not stirred for ten minutes.”

“Where—where were you?” He hardly knew that his lips had moved. The oblivion, and the lulling touch, seemed to have made that struggle in the fir belt a thing of hours ago.

“On the lawn there—just behind the house. Being a woman, I ought to have screamed out—but I never was able to do that yet. The nurse’s instinct made me run. You are better—you can move? Shall I call someone from the house?”

“No—no!” He set his teeth upon a gasp of recurring pain through his temples, put back her hand, and got to his feet. “No! Say nothing—there is more than enough on their minds already. It was my own fault for—for tackling a man whom I took to be poaching. And you saw me—you saw me from the lawn?”

“You need not thank me!” She stood, tall and composed as a Cleopatra, before him. Her quiet voice had taken a cold note, as if she were chilled by his manner. “I have done nothing. It happened to be late to-night before I came down for my only breath of air in the open. That is all. It was to be! Let it pass.”

"Forgive me!" He felt weak, dazed. On a sudden vague impulse he groped out for her hand and raised it to his lips. It was the homage of a single-hearted man who had escaped cynicism—who held woman in respect as something softly wonderful, tactful, and weaker than himself. "God knows, I am not ungrateful! I do thank you! only—only——"

What? The grey eyes watched him in strange wonder. And, for the second time that night, the natural impulse to speak out was checked in his throat. The sickness had passed. He could smile.

"Nothing—nothing! I will tell you, at some other time. Yes, I can walk quite easily—but I'll keep your arm. It must be late!"

"Half-past ten. There goes Felcote clock—one note," she said.

They went slowly over the grass, without another word. On the edge of the moonlit drive Spurr paused and looked around.

"Must I knock? I would rather—all this is strange to me."

And she seemed to understand his man's mind.

"Wait here," she said. "You need not be seen with me—so late. The drawing-room windows are still open—just up the balcony there. I have the key of the servants' entrance." She stood just an instant longer, looking at him. "You look ill," she whispered. "I am so sorry—so sorry that I cannot help you. But you'll know! A nurse is not exactly as other women. She is a woman—and something more. She has learned her life's lesson in the silent ward. You will be told, no

doubt, that Sister Judith was a mere living automaton, who existed in herself and thought only of herself. You will believe that, if you choose. I have been hated here for my very silence. Silence!—that is more eloquent than all the words to those who can understand. But I must not keep you out here. Evil will be worked into that small fact, you'll find. All these windows are eyes. Good-night!"

For that instant, drawn up, with the moonlight's play upon her, she looked like a tragedy queen. Then she had turned—to turn slowly again as the man's husky voice sounded.

"Come back!" He scarcely knew what had impelled him—knew only that he was stirred to the depths. He loathed mystery; yet he was groping into a deeper darkness every hour. He took a step and looked close into her colourless face. He was stern and strong enough in that moment. "I don't understand," he said. "I judge no one—I can read for myself. I speak to you now as I would speak to any woman I want to honour. You know what has happened to-night; you know that I stand in the most terrible position that could come to a man. I have to fight my way out of it—I don't care to feel that I am in the tentacles of further complications." He took both her wrists suddenly, and held them tight. "I may be wrong—you may think I am mad; but will you—can you—swear to me that you——"

No, he could not put it into words. Not a muscle of her composed face had twitched; the steady grey eyes windowed only a vast wonder.

It could never be asked or answered. He dropped her hands, and stood back.

"You go!" he said, more quietly. "Think no more of it—say nothing of this to anyone, as I asked you. Silence, you said just now, can be more eloquent than all the words!"

"Yes, trust me, even although I do not understand." Calmly, naturally, she brushed away the pine-needles and leaves adhering to his clothes, smoothed back the disordered wave of dark hair falling over his forehead, and drew his necktie into position with the cool, slim fingers. "There!" she said, ever so softly. "As a man, you might have forgotten that—and others might have wondered. Good-night!"

And she had moved around the house wall with her noiseless step. She had not looked back—she was not the woman to do that. Perhaps she knew—knew that he was staring into space with blank eyes, with the feeling that those tentacles were winding themselves more closely about him as he stood.

CHAPTER IX

IT was close upon eleven o'clock, and the house had grown quiet again, when Mrs Saxon, listening in the hall for the tenth time, heard the drawing-room windows click together. She drew a sharp breath of vague relief—nerved herself for the ordeal. He had come back, as quietly as he had gone!

Now she could hear him pacing the carpet with long, slow strides, like a man buried in tremendous thought. The door was ajar; craning forward, she could see him, his arms tightly folded, as he turned at the far end. It seemed to her that within the hour he had grown strangely haggard. She felt humanly bound to watch him, and yet she felt quiver after quiver of warm sympathy for the man and his situation. Why—oh, why, had not Mr Crewe, the London solicitor, seen fit to accompany him here in person as a guarantee? Why had Mr Spartan Loder kept even his lawyer at such a freezing distance?

She coughed suddenly. He had been going to touch the bell. And instantly he sprang forward.

"You, Mrs Saxon? Just the person I wanted. Yes, come in!" He closed the door and dragged forward a chair. "But I insist! I want no ceremony—I want nothing to eat; I was waiting to see someone. There! You won't mind, but I was anxious about your young lady. Is she——"

"She is sleeping quite calmly just now, Mr Spurr; and that is all I can honestly say at present."

"Is that so?" He looked past her, clearly troubled. He had in a quiet way, that made her tremble foolishly, pushed back the pile of keys that she had placed upon the table near him. "I was afraid, from her look, that the double shock——"

"But *you* could not be held to account for that, Mr Spurr," she struck in warmly. "Don't hint at that, please! God knows best what is to happen for good or evil, as we take it; and if, as Doctor Lancing says, no one is to see Miss Sheba for a week at least—well, we must obey him."

He hardly seemed to realise. He moved to and fro, his fingers clasping and unclasping behind him. She divined at once that this was an unconscious habit of his as he shaped some question that might not prove agreeable. And presently it came. He threw down something taken from his waistcoat pocket.

"Have you ever noticed a chain to which that fragment might belong, Mrs Saxon?"

"Chain?" She stared at the two-inch length of frail gold filaments. "I won't be sure. I half fancy—no, I can't say I have."

"Thank you." He repocketed it. "You may do. I—I picked it up near the house. Never mind that now. No one to see her for a week!" He whispered the words as to himself—twice. "This Doctor Lancing—I suppose he has always been called here in cases of illness?"

"For some years now—yes. He is considered to be far and away the most clever medical man

within five miles. And he is certainly the most refined and agreeable," something made her add.

"The successful man! Yes, I saw that at a glance." For a moment he watched the creeper tendrils gently swaying against a background of moonlit lawn. Questions and answers as yet seemed to be churned to a head by sheer necessity. He turned abruptly. "I'll tell you frankly why I asked, Mrs Saxon. It will sound strange, considering I know nothing at all of what has gone before; but what should make him think—or fear—that I was waiting to intrude myself upon Miss St John?"

She could only gasp. It did not reach her comprehension. He went on, firmly, quietly:

"One thing stands out clear to me at this moment. Doctor Lancing has resented my appearance on the scene. Otherwise, he would hardly have taken upon himself to give me that supercilious warning—almost a challenge—within an hour of my reaching the house. I was not to dream of seeing her without his permission. I don't think I answered him, and yet——"

"You mistook his manner, sir, I assure you! That couldn't be. He knows how sensitive and anxious she is—he seemed to fear that she might make too much of an effort and risk a real collapse on your account. Between ourselves now, sir," Mrs Saxon whispered, "I believe he meant to keep her quiet up there until—until the funeral should be behind us. And, if so, I know that he could have done nothing more really kind for her! . . . Pardon me, you are not at all well yourself,

Mr Spurr. You must give some thought to yourself. The supper is all laid, if you would only——”

No ; he had not heard the last words. He was wiping his forehead mechanically.

“So be it ! Of course, I was hoping and expecting to see her as soon as possible ; but we’ll let him know best. We’ll say it was an unwarranted suspicion of mine. I can speak with you, at any-rate. We are quite alone, I mean ?”

Mrs Saxon rose, threw open the door, and closed it again.

“We have never allowed prying or gossip here, Mr Spurr ; and I trust we never shall. Yes, we *must* speak of it ! It happened just so that neither the doctor, the servants, nor anyone outside, had an idea of anything being wrong. Beyond our three selves, only Miss Cottrell could have realised at all—and I think I can answer for her discretion, considering that she seldom opens her lips to anyone in the place, inside or out. And, of course, within a day or two we shall have seen the last of her here. But that—that fact cannot make it any the less terrible ! If I am not afraid, if I am quite calm, it is only because I went down on my knees and asked Almighty to reach out a Hand to us to-night. For we can never feel the same again until we *know* !”

And Wilfrid Spurr took the hand from his eyes. Under the tan of his skin there was a suggestion of grey, but nothing of weariness or helpless fear in his movements. He sat down facing her. Every word was the word of a strong, determined man momentarily overwhelmed and baffled.

“We shall know ! I have reason to think that

you believed in me almost at sight, and, after what has happened, I can never forget that. At one moment to-night I was on the point of turning my back upon it all, and taking my passage back to the West. Yes; a coward's impulse, as it must have left you all in a mist of terror and uncertainty; I saw that at once. I face the fact now that there has been a master stroke of diabolical criminality—that I cannot see clearly one hour ahead of me. For the moment, you *must* believe in me! Put yourself in my place: a feverish rush all the way from Toronto, knowing nothing of what was at this end of it; a few minutes' hurried talk with the lawyer in London; and then the train journey down to Barrowdene, to find my exact 'double' just leaving as I entered—to face this unspeakable position. I saw the look in Miss St John's eyes—I could never forget it!”

Sitting very still, Mrs Saxon gazed out through the balcony windows as if half expecting to see that other tanned face framed in the moonlight out there. That other man—that man without a name—had a definite flesh-and-blood personality. He seemed to have lived for that one hour, and then to have slipped back into some death-like obscurity which might never yield him up.

“Don't say it!” she said, in a hushed voice. “She is not here to answer you; it would break her heart if she knew you felt that. I have hardly dared to give it all another thought. Now you put it in such calm words I feel that we ought to have sent to the police in that very first moment. And yet—how could we? I know Miss Sheba saw the same picture that flashed over me. Those

men tramping up and down the stairs, in and out the rooms—with him lying hardly cold there; the lanterns shining everywhere in the grounds, the crowd coming farther and farther up the drive, the hue-and-cry. . . .” She checked the sobs that had been forming and melting like hailstones in her throat. “Oh, I thanked you in my heart for waiting. You’ll never know what I felt, sir, when you came back into that room of his alone!”

“I did,” he answered gently. “I read it, again, in Sheba’s eyes. To have called in detectives, and set up a world-wide sensation in the very hour of my uncle’s death—no, somehow I could not do it. What would be the first inevitable impression? That I had come seven thousand miles for his money, and his money alone. And, as I stand now, I have no just right to conclude that money was at the heart of it all. Who knows?”

She was silent for a moment. She could see the delicacy of the man’s mind, and she could grasp the delicacy of her own position.

“It came like a climax to all the suspense,” she whispered. “Like a thunderbolt at our feet, stunning us all. And yet, of course, something ought to be done. If that man deliberately planned——”

“Precisely!” He had seen her hand shake in the pause, and pressed it between his own. “I wanted to bring you round to that. You have not realised, but I know nothing yet beyond the bare fact. I waited to hear it all from your own lips, before the impression fades. Be quite calm; tell me all you can—what was said, and what was done. Let nothing slip!”

And, in a low voice, she told him, taking up the threads from that moment when the hall bell had first jangled wildly.

The listening man never once took his eyes from her face. He heard so distinctly, grasped it so well, that his own face grew more grave, more stern, more troubled.

"It grows darker!" he said, in the silence following. "It was like the moment between life and death—and I missed it. There was the library—the man stood there—the key had gone—the door was locked. He did not actually enter the room—could not have done so, whatever his motive; the windows beyond were also fastened. And yet——" He slowly rose to his feet. "How was that? I mean, how came the key to be in its place in the lock, thirty minutes afterwards, when I went to look? Answer that."

And Mrs Saxon swayed up, too, her cheeks ashen.

"I can't answer, Mr Spurr. I can't bear any more to-night. I don't want to say so, but I feel that those are two of the things that will never be answered in this life: why the clock in there should have stopped at the very moment, one might say, of the master's last breath; and why the key of that door should be missing just then—to be found a few minutes later. Yes—yes, it was lying at his very feet, as he stood there. One of the maids picked it up a few minutes afterwards."

One more pause. The pulse of the mystery could almost be felt to beat.

"What *can* I do?" Spurr whispered, his arms straining out. "A life's secret, that my uncle had

guarded so closely, given into the keeping of a villain who may be setting to work upon his knowledge to-morrow, now! I am playing into his hands. By to-morrow, naturally, the police here——”

“Would have done nothing,” she put in. “Felicote police! They would stride in and out of the house, take plenty of notes—and refreshments—and go off to report progress. They can’t help it. They were chosen for their size and muscle—not for their brain power! It was too late to use the telegraph, too late to put a ring round the county—— What is it, Mr Spurr.”

He was not listening. He had drawn back the balcony doors, stepped out, and shaded his eyes to look all ways. Now that he knew all, the analytical faculty flickered up in him less hazily. He was tensely following the dropped thread.

“We are sure—morally sure—that he could only have escaped by that dining-room window. In that case, he would have dropped to the path below here just as I faced you and Miss St John in the hall. In that moment, all was lost—and all gained. . . . This grass plot stretches away for some distance, I see. In his place, probably knowing nothing of the grounds or locality, I should have dashed straight ahead and made for that dense clump of bushes away over there. Is it a coppice? It looks too regular, and yet I can see nothing but leaves. There!”

She peered as he pointed. She was glad just then of the grip of his hand upon hers.

“You have wonderful eyes, Mr Spurr,” she had to breathe. “Unless I knew, I should see

only a mass of gloom. That is our maze. Mr Loder built it years ago for his own private use. He—he came so to loathe the prying eyes and ears of Felcote. They could not follow him there. I was never in it, but I know it was built as a puzzle, with cross paths everywhere that lead to nothing, and that it cost him a small fortune in money. You're never thinking to go across there at this hour, sir?"

"Not?" he whispered. He had been testing the balcony rail, as if for a leap down.

"Don't dream of it! Wait till daylight, now!" she begged, with a sudden tingle of misgiving as to what might lurk beyond those still breadths of shadow across there. "If anything happened to you now, what would Miss Sheba——"

"Miss Sheba?" he repeated wonderingly. Something had risen in the housekeeper's throat, as she turned away. "Miss Sheba?"

"I—I don't know what made me say it. I thought it hardly right for you to leave the house again this side of to-morrow."

And he looked at her, his lips twitching curiously.

"But—you forget! I must be going, and very soon. No; I am not jesting, Mrs Saxon! You, and you alone, are taking me for granted; I have not produced one tangible proof of my identity yet—I have none to produce. I am going down to the station hotel. I shall come straight here first thing in the morning. I can do nothing more or less."

The blank stare, and then Mrs Saxon was sweeping out in her stateliest manner. She reappeared with a lighted taper, a small flask of

wine, and some biscuits. She was a different person.

"This way, Mr Spurr!" She pronounced the name with marked emphasis. "It wants twenty minutes to one. This is not London—nor Toronto. The last train went through Felcote hours ago. The hotel manager would not thank you for hammering there for a single bed that would certainly not be aired. Your room is ready; I saw to that myself."

"But——" He was manifestly touched, yet irresolute. "It might appear to Miss St John that at least I——"

She stopped him, with quiet severity.

"Eighteen minutes to one! Let me tell you, here and now, Mr Spurr, you do not know her—you are making the mistake of your life! If Mr Loder thought more of her than of anything else in his world—well, enough! This way!" and he found himself following her up the massive old staircase, with its niches and galleries overhead. "Here you are! Your ulster is here; your hat I could not find; your bag is in that corner. Drink this, and sleep—forget it all for a while! Sleep is so wonderful. God bless us all, sir—good-night!"

He had found everything that a man could want. He had undressed in a sort of stupor, put on his sleeping suit, drunk the wine without knowing its flavour, smoked an inch of a cigar, put out the light, placed something under his pillow, and stretched himself out between the cool sheets. Now—now he could realise that every bone and

muscle in his body were weary with a weariness akin to pain.

He heard two o'clock strike. He was waiting to hear three strike, and then the drowsiness stole down in spite of his whirling brain and a determination not to sleep until some clue had taken shape. He remembered nothing more until—until he found himself staring out into darkness, every hair of his head seeming to stand up like a red-hot wire. He had known, as without knowing, that something breathed in the same room. Something was moving almost soundlessly to and fro. The blind was drawn; he had nothing but his animal instincts to guide him; but he *knew*.

"Who's that?" he said, as a man might speak in his sleep.

A rustle, then all was still. He half swayed up. No eyes could have seen through that darkness, but his ears told him that the invisible shape was drawing away, stealthily, foot by foot. Like a blaze through his mind went the recollection that he had placed the pistol beneath his pillow, as he had done every night since leaving Toronto for the unknown. It was out—aimed for where the door seemed to be.

"Don't move! Not another step!" he said clearly. "If you do, as God hears me, I fire every barrel in this revolver!"

There was a long, faint moan—a sound that he was never to forget. And it came—it came from the throat of a woman. A woman! . . . A woman stood there, cowering from the flash that must spirt out of the darkness and reveal her—kill her.

His arm slowly went down. He could neither

speaking nor move. And, as if he had given a mute psychic offer of escape, there came the sudden swift rustle and door click. He knew that he was alone.

He sprang, lit the taper, and looked around. Nothing had been touched; he took all in at a glance. There was nothing but the echo of that moan to tell him that his brain had not played him false. The corridor was bare. The house was still with a stillness that he could not break.

He shot the doorkey, that he had forgotten to use till now. He turned, with simply the knowledge that one more link had been added to the chain of mystery fettering his brain and body!

CHAPTER X

WAN fingers of dawnlight were feeling their way past the blind. The briefest yet strangest night in Spurr's experience had come to its end.

He had lain with closed eyes, but without further attempt at sleep. In that hour every incident of the past ten days was lived anew. He was pacing the white decks of the ocean liner again, wondering ever and ever what could be waiting at the end of that haphazard quest. He was flying southward to London in the boat express—and now pushing open the inner door of the solicitor's office. He heard once again the latter's cold, surprising words: "I know little more than yourself of Mr Spartan Loder's private affairs. What I do know, I am expected to keep to myself. Wisest for me to simply hand you his address, and to let you know that he is not expected to live." And then he was whirling southward yet again—rumbling along the dark Barrowdene road in a fly—and leaping down to learn that, after spanning two continents, he had missed his object. Death and that sinister "double" had cheated him of it by a bare few minutes.

And yet—and yet—something was telling him insistently as he lay, that he had rushed to England to meet his fate.

And ever and again he found himself uncon-

sciously trying to frame upon the wall the face of his uncle's ward as he had first seen it—that sweet, pale oval, out of which shone two great velvety, appealing eyes. Sheba! It was just the name he would have given her: soft, womanly, dignified, tender—Sheba!

Five o'clock! He was up and dressed, watching the sky out there. Some invisible artist had been tinting its blue-blackness with broadening streaks of silver and saffron. Now the sun itself shot up and threw a golden glory over all. The dew glistened like a frost of diamonds. A lark sang high and richly, rooks cawed back from a clump of giant elms, and beyond all was the muffled thunder of the tide beating against its cliff boundaries. Full day had dawned, and there might be stern work before him. But the ways of the still silent house were an unopened book to him as yet; he must wait a little longer.

"Sheba's ill," he kept saying to himself. "I shall not see her for a week. A week of these days!"

He sat at the open window, sea-borne air fanning freshness upon his tired, tanned face. Daylight thought gave it all a curiously different aspect. The keen edge of the horror was taken off; he could sift out details. But no solution!

No one in England—not even the lawyer—had ever set eyes on him until yesterday. He had no papers or credentials whatever in his possession. In the event of an inquiry, there was nothing on this side the Atlantic to prove him his uncle's nephew. Felcote might conceivably be whispering of him as a second masquerader on the scene,

drawn by the rumours of Spartan Loder's vast hoards. Not that he minded for himself—but his thoughts always veered back to Sheba St John. Had she taken this woman's refuge in order to avoid coming face to face with him? It was an indescribable flash-thought, and a word rose up in swift answer—No!

That clock was striking again. Six times—nay, seven. He sprang up, drew on a cap and his ulster, and stepped quickly out and down the stairs. His fingers were drawing the hall door bolts, when a little cough behind made him turn. There stood the stately housekeeper, pointing smilingly to an open doorway from which stole the aroma of new-made coffee.

"Not a word," she whispered, waving back his protest. "I smelt the cigar—and guessed the rest. Come along."

He hesitated, then obeyed. He would not, could not, let her know just now what it was that had broken his chance of sleep. He sat down, sipped the coffee, and made a brave pretence of eating. He was telling himself that this must be the dining-room, across which that impostor had taken his fevered rush. Presently, as Mrs Saxon rustled out to answer the servants' bell, he set down his cup. Next moment he had dropped lightly from the balcony railing. He could explain later.

Now!

His pulse quickened at once. Just at this point there was a distinct furrowing of the gravel surface, as if someone had sprung blindly, heavily, scored the ground in falling, and then careered wildly away across the lawn.

That lawn, fortunately, was newly cropped. For the first few yards the mark of those toe-tips was thrillingly distinct; he could follow them at a run. Then they became less definite; a gossamer of dew-webs had in parts all but effaced them; it was only by crouching low and staring hard that he could say where the grass blades had been recently bruised. And here it was that his partly developed backwood instincts enabled him to forge forward where an everyday police officer would have stood at a loss.

He had won a hard way across two-thirds of the green stretch, and was straining every faculty to the utmost, anxious to get beyond sight of the house. Just once the strong sensation of being watched made him glance backwards. From an upper window—he could not be sure in which corridor—he saw a face intently peering down at him. A woman's face, withdrawn almost instantly. It was nothing, and yet some queer connection of ideas made him straighten up and clap a hand to his waistcoat pocket.

A grim look tightened his strong jaws. He would not turn back—could not pause now to think it out; but a partial light had broken in upon him. There was just the bare possibility that that fragment of gold chain had fallen from the pocket, but it was not there now. And the waistcoat had hung from the foot of his bed during the night.

He drew a deep breath, and went doggedly on, with a care and acumen that would have done credit to a professional detective. These foot-marks might be obliterated in twelve hours more.

When at last he paused it was because he found himself brought up at the thick dark patch, green in this sunlight, which Mrs Saxon had called the maze. In fact, the narrow, pillar-box-like slit of an entrance, with its fantastic arch of close-cut privet, faced him. Bar or gateway there was none. And, as he stood, the maze seemed to rustle and call to him from its deep recesses.

He dropped the footprint clue, without knowing why. Through him rushed the thought that that flying man had made straight for this labyrinthine refuge in case of close pursuit. It seemed so feasible—it seemed to fit the moment's uncertainty exactly. It might have struck him as barely probable that his "double" should have known of the retreat at all ; but it did not—not at the moment. He gave a hasty glance back at the house windows, now dwindled to tiny, shining squares, and plunged straight into the narrow path.

The effect was startling. A sensation of being cramped for space—the sunlight almost blotted out—a cathedral-like twilight and solemnity—the strong scent of the privet wood mingled with faint steam from soil scarce ever reached by light. Spinning round he saw that the entrance had apparently closed up behind him. He tiptoed back. It was a trick entrance, obscured by a double pillar of the privet, and not obvious to anyone *inside* the maze. He noted the fact with a little laugh to himself.

He could see no complications ahead. It appeared mere child's play to walk straight to the heart of Mr Loder's maze. Several paths, all apparently running parallel, and suggesting a curve that

must eventually bring them back to this same point, opened out on either side. He chose to follow the central avenue, quickened his pace expectantly, and presently found himself barred by a lateral wall of the privet. Turning resolutely back—by the same avenue, he was prepared to make oath—he found himself brought to a halt by the same obstacle. Wheeling off at a likely angle, he went forward a little less impetuously, his nerves still tense with the idea of hitting upon some vital discovery—he knew not in what shape or form.

It was when he had repeated or reversed the process several times, without the faintest result, that he stood to grasp for himself the astounding intricacy of the living scheme, and the apparent futility of locating any clue here.

The place was treeless, but that baffling twilight lay over it like a velvet pall. Each branching path, bordered by the rigid privet walls, and bridged at intervals by grotesque arches, was an exact replica of all the rest. No two persons could pass abreast down any one of them, and the sensation of moving ever forward and yet backward, penned in by those coffin-like hedges, was something more than merely novel. One eerie mental effect in particular it had: that of causing the labyrinth to expand illimitably at every successive turn.

There seemed nothing for it but to strike back and take up afresh the lawn clue. He had felt fairly confident of reaching the arched entrance without difficulty; it was only when he had tramped determinedly for what appeared unpleasantly like a solid hour that he drew up in a

dilemma. In any other circumstances the situation would have appealed forcibly to his sense of humour; just now he was aware of a cold chagrin. His lips refused to hazard a shout; and yet to stand there almost within hailing distance of the house, without power to reach it, seemed the acme of ironic development. Guiding clue from overhead there was none—only the same narrow slit of blue sky above each path. If he had ever known Spartan Loder in life, in that silence he could almost have heard a mocking chuckle from the old man's throat. Spartan Loder had left behind him a living trap.

And then, of a sudden, his heart took that sick bound. All his nerves seemed raw on the surface. A little sweat was beading out upon him.

"My God!" he whispered involuntarily, with no thought of irreverence. "What was that?"

He had halted at the junction of three cross paths. As he scanned them carefully in turn, he saw something that seemed wholly incredible at such a moment, in such a place. The dreamlike flutter of a woman's robe—a white robe—at the end of the central path. It had appeared and vanished like a glow-worm's light in darkness.

There was a woman here, quite close to him, moving like a noiseless spirit through this same twilight. He thought of the figure in the night just passed; he thought of the face at the window. It might be that his every futile turn and twist was being watched.

Pooh! He wiped his forehead—laughed to himself. Pooh! One of the house servants, perhaps—fluttered and confused by his unex-

pected presence here. One fact, and one only, was crystal-clear : he was not alone in old Loder's maze. It had no deeper significance !

He had cleared his throat, to call out a simple reassuring question. He checked it. Heaven alone knew why, but a shout seemed as strangely out of place here as in a hushed church. Instead, he took a light, swift run on tiptoe. All he asked was to catch up with the figure again, and keep it in sight from a discreet distance. There was no call for any disturbing stories of a strange man seen groping in the maze.

Eh ? He might almost have believed that she, too, had acted on the same impulse to run. The same elusive fragment of white skirt was just trailing out of sight beyond another bend. Once more he sprinted along at a stealthy rush—to pause and stare again in a sickly heat. This was like playing hide-and-seek in a dark room. He almost dreaded to move forward, to turn back, to breathe aloud. He and the phantom figure were winding around each other, as the Indian spy circles his pursuer's track. It seemed in front—behind—everywhere but where it should have been !

At this point, if anything were certain on this earth, he must be within a few paces of her ; yet there was no sign of movement anywhere. Did she know ? Was she following or fleeing from him ? Several paths crossed just here with an inconsequence galling beyond words at the moment. None seemed more than thirty yards in length, and yet each ran toward a fresh, distinct tangle. A madman's ingenuity from inception to consummation. He would know !

Barely a second could have been lost before he put a hand to his mouth. The words cut the silence with a ringing distinctness that could not be mistaken.

"I am Mr Wilfred Spurr! I must ask you to answer me back—to tell me which path I should, follow for the lawn!"

The echo came past him, and died again. Not another sound! Yet every syllable had been heard—upon that he would stake his very life. A sensation that he had never before experienced stole over him, as he moved slowly round to gaze along the paths in turn, not knowing across which that fugitive white figure might next flit like an intangible, voiceless thing.

"Answer me, whoever you are!" he shouted huskily.

But nothing answered. He could only stand spellbound, sure of something deep and sinister breathing in the hot, oppressive twilight—something only too consonant with the mystery of all that had happened since he sprang from the train at Barrowdene station. There could be only one natural explanation of her silence—she dreaded recognition here. Why?

"She shall—she shall speak!" he said to himself twice.

Just where he stood the green wall in one spot had wasted slightly, and quite mechanically he parted the twigs to see beyond. Next moment he had gasped in a spasm of sheer horror—and then was making a fierce, mighty effort to crash through the barrier. . . . Just beyond it must lie a parallel path, and the woman's dilated eyes had

been staring through at him. Staring eyes, almost like those of an animal glowing from the rear of a cage—as if she held her breath in a fascination of wonder as to his next movement. They were gone. He could never say to what face they had belonged. All was blotted out by a surge of passion. He had been watched.

Thud ! With a supreme, resistless effort he had dragged himself over, and dropped heavily to the other side. And—he was just in time to see the noiseless figure fade like a ghost into the obscurity at the far end.

“Stop! Who is it? Speak!” his maddened voice rose. “Speak!”

He ran hard, reached the spot, paused again. At that moment he would have yielded a year of precious life to confront the elusive figure, which might even now be standing motionless within a few paces of him—which might even now be. . . .

There—there again! He had seen the flutter of the white robe once more. He panted forward. This time—this time! He leaped, clutched—not at the dress upon a woman’s body, but at a strip of something dangling from a barb-like spike of the privet wood. His staring eyes focussed a piece of soft, refined material—not white, but of a delicate primrose, dotted with silk sprays of wisteria blossom—jagged beyond all shadow of doubt from the robe of the woman who had just flown by that bend.

He thrust it beneath his linen cuff. He was beaten. His man’s endurance was exhausted.

The sun had climbed nearly to its highest and hottest when, weary, listless, and distinctly dishevelled, Wilfrid Spurr found himself facing the

arched slit of an entrance. There it was, just as if a pitying magician's wand had summoned it.

He was past feeling surprise, or even relief. He walked dazedly through into the open—into what seemed a new world. There, within three hundred easy strides, stood the rambling old square house. He looked all ways, flicked his clothes, and then, with another queer little laugh to himself, struck at right angles across the lawn. Whom could he tell? Who would believe him? Even the significance of that strip of dress material seemed to fade out in the open sunlight. He had set out full of determination, and he had achieved nothing. Nothing!

He plunged recklessly through an evergreen shrubbery into the drive. In the cool shadow of the trees he stood, his arms straining out, whispering:

"Toronto! I wish to heaven now I had never left it—never seen his cursed advertisement! Heir—to what? To a legacy of dread!"

Puff—puff—whirr-r-r! A spotless, exquisitely enamelled motor car was just spinning away from the house front. Like a thing of life it took the bend; in what seemed a flash of time it was whizzing by him. No! It drew up almost abreast of him. He went to draw back, but it was too late. The man lying back in the cushioned tonneau leaped out, lifted his glossy hat, extended a gloved hand as slender and shapely as a woman's, and smiled till his white teeth showed in two glistening rows.

"Mr Wilfrid Spurr? Yes!—The very man I most wanted to run across to-day!"

It was Doctor Gilbert Lancing.

CHAPTER XI

STEADILY into each other's eyes the two men looked, as if fencing for an opening. Their hands had just met, and then fallen apart. Spurr was the first to break the pause.

"You see me rather at a disadvantage, perhaps?" he asked coolly. He had given one glance down for the other's waistcoat. It was buttoned over by the immaculate frock-coat.

"My dear sir, a medical man sees a good many of his fellow-creatures at a disadvantage—or he starves!" The ice was broken. Doctor Lancing laughed softly. Spurr found his arm suddenly linked with an ease as enviable as stupefying. "Walk back a few steps, will you? My chauffeur forgets what he hears as soon as possible, but he is only a man. Thanks! Can you guess what I have to say?"

"Perhaps I can. That you find Miss St John so much more unwell to-day that you have ordered her to keep to her room for two weeks instead of one? It will not surprise me."

He watched closely—watched a face as delicately carved and poised as those of the Greek gods. He half admired the man whose steely-blue eyes betrayed nothing. There was a suggestion of superior privilege and triumph in the curve of the doctor's thin lips.

"It need not," he said softly. "Oh no—nothing

of that. Miss St John is still under the soothing influence of the draught which I prescribed."

"Why?" The fierce syllable would not be kept back. That melodious drawl set him quivering. It had the ring of artificiality; it smacked of the surgery—and it hinted at the subtle advantage of his position. "Why? Speak plainly—speak like a man—if you speak to me at all!"

"My dear sir!" He laughed. "I found it necessary; that is all. You have no knowledge of Miss St John's temperament, I believe. A curiously susceptible woman, apt to magnify little worries until they take tragic shape, I assure you! In fact"—he flicked a tiny green fly from his coat sleeve as he glanced around—"I think seriously of sending her quite away. As medical adviser to Mr Loder's household, I have never considered that the Felcote—or, rather, the Manor House—atmosphere suited Miss St John's constitution. I am sure of it now."

"Quite sure?" Spurr asked, still watching.

"Quite! I have had considerable opportunity of judging. Er—try one of my cigarettes, Mr Spurr. I seldom smoke, myself, but I believe these are worth an experiment!"

Spurr looked at the gold-mounted case, without seeming to see it. He looked away. His set face had not moved a muscle.

"Do you ever smoke cigars?" he asked absently.

"Yes, once in a month, perhaps," came the quick answer.

"I see. I merely wondered."

Then the pause. Doctor Lancing was a little paler, if anything, that was all. He smoothed his

gloves, till the other man roused as from a reverie.

"I have an idea," Spurr said slowly, "that Miss St John is a woman who will suit her own convenience in the matter entirely. And there we will leave——"

"You speak for her?" flashed from the thin lips. He bowed smilingly. "That is a revelation for me. Possibly, too, your own faith in doctors' advice is limited?" and Spurr gave his quiet little laugh.

"As it happens, it is. I never needed the advice to any extent."

"You have been fortunate, then!"

"Yes," he said, with a steady deliberation. "Perhaps I have," and he was moving away.

"One moment!" His arm was gripped. Gilbert Lancing's voice came a trifle faster. "I can waive that studied insult, I can afford to. I'll say what I meant to say. I am not curious in the least in regard to your intentions, but I have just happened to recollect something interesting. You may want me before long. In fact, you may find me an indispensable factor in your affairs. See?"

"You?" Spurr measured him with his eye from head to foot, as if to gauge something for a future contingency. "You?" he repeated.

"Precisely! You see, although Mr Loder lived without friends, he could not die without fulfilling a legal condition. I believe—I am not positive—I am named as one of the executors of your late uncle's will. He mentioned some time ago that he had done me that honour. He may have changed his mind since. If not, as I say, you

may need me. That is all! Very little, was it not?"

"And who is the other executor, may I ask?"

"You may! It is Mr Carnforth, our highly-esteemed minister here. Like many other free-thinkers, Mr Loder preferred a religious man for that capacity."

Minutes appeared to pass before Wilfred Spurr could seem to rivet his faculties upon the development. His mind was still in the maze, following that velvet-footed figure along the shadowy paths. He was about to speak, when, for the second time, he found his wrist gripped. Doctor Lancing stared, pointed, and dropped it, with a palpable sneer in his laugh.

"Pardon me! I knew I had seen that material before. Yes, in one piece, on the pretty wearer's back! The summer robe that my patient wore at church only a few weeks back. I sat behind her; I admired it; but it would never have occurred to me to ask for a sample to carry about. Do excuse me!—Miss St John's dress—very quaint idea—very——"

"A lie!" Spurr's olive tan had deepened for a second; then half the blood seemed to drain from his face. He strode closer. "I say it again—a lie!"

"*What?*" whispered the other. "*What?*"

His fingers had closed upon the lapel of Spurr's coat; in his blue eyes something had flickered. He stood very still as Spurr struck the arm away. The latter had become as suddenly cool again.

"I have said it to your face," he said. "If,

some day, I can't prove it, I'll apologise. For the present, good-day!"

He walked coolly on toward the house, as if all unaware of a man staring after him, of gloved hands clenched until the stitching cracked, of a face ghastly with passion that dared not vent itself openly.

"You shall pay the price of that," the doctor was whispering to space. "Heavens, you shall!—and before long!"

"You, sir! Oh, thank goodness! I began to fear—I hardly know what—that you must be lost, at least!"

It was Mrs Saxon's hushed, welcoming voice. She sat down to let a tremble pass as Wilfred Spurr stepped through the open doorway of the hall and stood looking about him. Nearly five hours!—and he reappeared as quietly as if they had been minutes!

"Lost? You have hit upon the very word!" he owned. "I was lost in that maze of yours. I forgot there were no trees to 'blaze' as one goes; I walked straight in, and have but just emerged."

She stared at him—at his clothes—her lips parted in vague awe.

"Never! Believe me, sir, I stood at that window twice and thought to myself, 'could he have ventured in there alone?' You may laugh, but it's a mercy you are here now! And yet— isn't it singular?—nearly all the gentlemen who have happened to call here—not many, to be sure—have gone straight to it the moment they heard. A mile across?—a *mile*? Bless you, sir, not a half—nothing like it!"

He half smiled his scepticism. She wondered what it was that he held behind him, and why that arm kept twitching. She wondered many things.

"There!" she breathed. "You looked just a little like poor Mr Loder, as you stood at that moment! Fifteen years ago! As if it were yesterday, I recollect opening the library door one day, never thinking, and he was there, with the grand oak dining-table dotted all over with lines and crosses. The way he sprang—the way his eyes flamed! It palsied me for the moment. As if I should take in all his spider-web calculations! Yes; the plan of his maze. He had men brought from a distance. We used to watch them at work; we were not quite certain whether he might be laying a mine, or something of that sort. They transplanted shrubs about three feet high; as they moved, I recollect, they seemed to be walking round and round each other without ever getting nearer. Then gradually the place got dark and deceptive. Once a year he had the same men to come and clip the hedges. But the gardener will tell you more than I can, if you are interested."

He was deeply engrossed. She saw it, and went on:

"Once, and once only, I can recollect Mr Crewe, that stiff, silent solicitor gentleman, coming down here. He was swallowed up in the maze for hours, while Mr Loder sat there shaking with chuckles—to give them a name. He challenged its extent, as you do now. He demanded the plan; but Mr Loder had never shown that to a living soul—that bit of secrecy was life and breath to him." She

bent nearer, sinking her voice. "What do you think Mr Crewe did? Fastened some silk twine to an arrow affair, shot the arrow across from side to side in some clever way, drew his silk tight, and then measured it. He had lost his last train back to town, but he gained his point—and that's what most gentlemen like to do, I know. Mr Spurr, he was dumfounded to know that he had been rambling and groping all those hours in a mere toy speck of a place. I know full well he would have given something to step across again and set fire to the whole mystery, out of spite. He has never been here since, at anyrate. I had never set foot in the thing, because I had no wish to disobey Mr Loder; and when that once he insisted upon my following him to see the pavilion he had built in the middle, I——"

"Pavilion?" Spurr whispered curiously. "Where? Are you dreaming this?"

"To be sure!—the little glass-roofed house on the mound. You might call it a sort of baby bungalow or summer-house. *He* labelled it his pavilion. Yes; with stained-glass windows and a tiled flooring, actually! I haven't forgotten it yet. It was very hot, and he spoke not a word. I felt sinking away as I followed him in and out those awful paths. When we suddenly came out to the mound, and he pointed—well, I suppose I must have been worked up!—it looked to me like a sort of goblin affair—not real at any other moment. I think I gave one stifled scream. The hedges came close all round his pavilion; there was hardly room to turn, and not a breath of air to breathe; and the flies hung over it in a perfect cloud.

There, it was no place for any woman, much less a woman with nerves. But, poor Mr Loder!" She turned away eyes that had gone dim and misty. "He loved it. Come to that, he couldn't have been more secure against noise or prying eyes on the top of a mountain; so that was everything, I suppose. Not that it matters now to anyone else; the fascination of the place died with him. No, sir; I doubt whether you would ever find the pavilion without his key of the paths—unless you were trying *not* to find it. Once, and once only . . . Mr Spurr! What—what is *that*?"

She went back a slow step. The new master had not been listening. Abruptly, determinedly, almost as if it cost him an effort, he suddenly held out a jagged strip of cloth.

"How—how came that to be lying on the lawn? It seemed new, so I——"

"New!" Her voice thickened with awe. "On the lawn—that! Impossible! It's a strip of the top flounce of Miss Sheba's delaine gown, that Mr Loder paid such a price for two months ago—silk wisteria blossom worked by hand upon delaine!"

"It is not!" rattled in the man's throat. He tossed the remnant down, and turned unsteadily. He put out a hand to clutch the oak chair at his side; once again the blood had seemed to drain from his face; his eyes stared as at something no one else could see. Then he had turned again. "It never was. I refuse to hear it. Show me—show me the dress from which it came!"

In the silence she stared at him, eyes wide and lips apart, all else forgotten. There was something

that she, too, struggled to grasp from a woman's point of view. She whispered:

"I can. There was never another piece of material in this house—in all Felcote—like it. It came straight from Paris to a dressmaker at Barrowdene. I recollect seeing Miss Sheba step into the carriage the first time——"

"No, never—never!" he muttered. He bit his lip as upon an impulse to say something best left unsaid. "Can you show me the dress? That is all I want. Now!"

Mrs Saxon turned and went up the staircase. He paced to and fro, arms drawn up stiffly at his side. It seemed an unendurable interval before her sharp whisper came down from the first landing. He stumbled up. Mrs Saxon was trembling. She slowly unfolded a length of the wisteria-sprayed cloth. All her woman's instincts were on edge.

"Look! That identical piece is missing—torn clean out. The dress is ruined; it is soiled from throat to hem. Only a day or two back—certainly not three—it was hanging in tissue wrappings in the wardrobe in Miss Sheba's dressing-room, as pure and beautiful as new snow. How—how is it to be accounted for?"

"God knows!" He wiped his forehead. He spoke very quietly again now. "Say not a word to anyone. Put it back!"

"Back—in this condition?"

"Yes! The dress is nothing—Miss Sheba's honour is everything. I beg your pardon for answering you as I did. Let this rest between ourselves, until light comes through the darkness. It will!"

He went mechanically down to the dining-room, and stood there—stood like a man struggling to throw off invisible fetters. She had replaced the robe in its recess, locked the wardrobe door with a shiver of prescience not to be explained; then she suddenly came back to realisation, and hurried back to the hall.

“Forgive us all, sir! I don’t know what you must be thinking! Lunch has been laid for you since ten o’clock, when I saw what had happened at breakfast. I insist, Mr Spurr! I’m just going to ring the bell. . . . Hark! Someone for you, sir?”

CHAPTER XII

WHEELS had sounded unnoticed. The house bell pealed. Before Spurr's mind could act a servant had passed him and thrown back the hall door.

A murmur of rich voices, an indefinable swish of skirts, a wave of Parma violet scent, and two figures were floating royally forward. Carlotta Barrington, and her frigid, inseparable shadow—Blanche. There was no time to wonder or to beat a graceful retreat. Carlotta had seen him. Her great, red-brown eyes sweeping round to take in every physical detail of the unnamed man standing there so stiff and still, she bore down upon the housekeeper with a little cry and both hands flung out dramatically.

"Mrs Saxon! We had to! It seemed too sudden and terrible to be true. Our poor, dear Sheba! How is she bearing it this morning? Do tell her! Bygones must be bygones from now; the cruel restraint has been none of our seeking, as all the world knows. She needs all her courage to-day—and you, too!"

Mrs Saxon's presence of mind had not deserted her for an instant. She comprehended all at a glance. Her own hands folded calmly, she faced them with her stateliest bow of reserve. She knew that Wilfred Spurr stood there uncertainly behind her. She acted upon a woman's unerring instinct.

"Thank you! Will you——" She was holding back the drawing-room door.

For the first time in many years the best room in the Manor House was opened for Carlotta and Blanche Barrington. They floated in. It was a great moment, tingling with possibilities. Wilfred Spurr, as a man, must follow to explain the position and apologise for his unprepared appearance. He must!

He had moved a step. He found his arm plucked. Mrs Saxon held the door, and whispered tensely:

"You need not, sir! You shall not! You understand why they came? Once recognise their footing here, you'll never keep them out again in life. Could you read nothing in that lady's eyes, sir?"

"Her eyes? I hardly saw. Who are they? Surely someone must——"

She whispered rapidly again. A light illumined his weary, set face. He nodded, and tiptoed quietly back down the passage. For perhaps five minutes Mrs Saxon waited and watched calmly from the first landing. In that time she had seen the head of Carlotta, with its drooping hat of feathers over chestnut hair, look out cautiously twice. Then she tapped.

"I am sorry, Miss Barrington, but our young lady does not feel equal to seeing anyone yet. In fact, opiates have been necessary, and I think it unwise to disturb her. If you care to leave your message in writing——"

"No—no!" Both figures swerved icily from the mirror there. Carlotta peered beyond around

the hall, was baffled, and had to betray the fact. "As you say, wholly unnecessary to disturb her on our account. So sorry we troubled you!"

"No message, then?" Mrs Saxon's quiet bow implied: "No need to linger, then!"

"Give her our deepest sympathy, won't you? We will put off our call until a less tragic moment—say that! And yet, is there *no* way in which we could help?"

"I know of none, Miss Barrington. Mr Spurr is here now, to make all necessary arrangements on Miss St John's behalf, and fully capable, thanks!"

"Really?" breathed Blanche. "How interesting for her—I should say, how singularly providential! Why——"

A hiss from Carlotta's teeth checked her.

"Why, yes, of course, we heard that Mr Loder's nephew had arrived. But in that case—ah, yes, I see what Mrs Saxon means! I feared it! But, there, it is not as if she had never mentally faced the change, now rendered inevitable. Mrs Saxon, it does seem so overpoweringly sad!"

Mrs Saxon was flicking a suspicion of dust from the faded pictures, and heard nothing. And still not another glimpse of the bronzed man with that intent, powerful-looking face. Carlotta, as she swept out, had to dare it in a whisper, backed by her most angelic smile.

"Oh, dear Mrs Saxon! Surely that was not Mr Spurr himself—the travelled-looking gentleman who stood here just now? Of course not!"

"Just now?" She seemed to reflect. "Yes; that was Mr Wilfred Spurr whom you saw."

"It was!" Carlotta suppressed a quivering gasp.

"And you did not even mention our names and standing as neighbours whose grounds all but meet! Mrs Saxon!"

"Pardon me, Miss Barrington, that is just what I did."

"Did! And yet he could——" Carlotta paused, the white teeth sunk in her lower lip. The spasm passed. Her bell-like laugh rippled out clearly enough to make him writhe for his manhood, was he anywhere within hearing. "Ah, to be sure! So shy!—how often the way with these Colonial gentlemen! Toronto, I think they said? Why, of course, Blanche dear, that cannot be so very far from the grizzly bear region! Imagine! *Good-bye*, Mrs Saxon! *Don't* fail to let Miss St John know that all our sympathies are with her at this unnerving time! Thanks, so much!"

"It's all right, sir," said Mrs Saxon, tapping at a door farther down. "One little unpleasantness is out of your path. I don't think they're likely to bring any more of that sympathy here for a while." And Wilfred Spurr looked out.

"Thanks—thanks for all!"

That far-away look was in his eyes still, and he had pressed his hand to them unconsciously.

"Don't let the greater trouble eat away your life, sir," she ventured huskily. "That won't do. There's the lunch still lying, and a cup of tea would——"

"In a moment!" He looked away. "You—you did not disturb Miss St John just now, of course?"

"Not for worlds! I looked in as I passed, and she still slept on. I was feeling uneasy about her,

till Doctor Lancing called again. It seemed more like a trance than sleep. I mean, I have seen her eyes open, looking at me—so strangely, so piteously—as if her brain struggled to work while the body lay exhausted. We got her to take a little nutriment with the draught, just now, but it was not like feeding the living! . . . There, don't mind me, sir! She said not a word, and hardly knew what was going on, I'm sure. That pitiful, fixed look of hers up into the doctor's face made me go cold. Are you waiting to ask her anything important, sir? If so, spite of the doctor, you shall——"

"No—no! I was only wondering whether—whether she had been able to leave her room at all to-day. I can wait. Thanks, I want nothing—I mean, I'll go straight now and have the lunch. Don't let the servant wait at table—I want nothing of that now!"

She hung back a moment longer. Her voice changed. She was looking at the clock against the left-hand wall—the clock as tall as a man.

"I've thought, and thought," she whispered. "I lived it all over again in a dream last night. That clock stopped dead at the exact moment, you might say, when the last breath was passing from the master's body. It was wound—I tried it; and I never knew it to stop in that way before. You hear how steadily it goes—tick-a-tick; tick-a-tick! No, I'm not superstitious in the least, but——" She saw the shadow sweep his face—"Your lunch, Mr Spurr, this moment!"

He obeyed. One hour later he was back alone in the same room, the door closed. It had been

known as the library, because the few books the dead man had cared to possess for show purposes were ranged on dark shelves there; but it offered nothing more definite to an investigating mind than the same man's maze had done.

Nothing! He had tapped and tried every likely-looking panel, and fluttered the pages of every bound volume—he scarcely knew why. To and fro he paced in the silence of the afternoon sunlight, his jaws drawn and set, his hands clenched tightly behind him. A hollow, unavailing thought, but he found himself breathing it desperately more than once—"If only the dead could speak one more word!"

Reduced to one simple problem, what did it mean?—what *could* it have meant?

Down at the heart of the seething crucible there lay one concrete morsel of fact.

Assuredly armed with part or the whole of Spartan Loder's revelation, the spurious nephew had descended those stairs with a purpose. Unexpectedly balked by a locked door, by the sudden arrival of the man he had most cause to dread, he had escaped by the adjoining apartment. That one fact must always stand out clear: his objective had been the library—this room, and no other. To obtain a paper, he had whispered. But that might be a pretext coined in the throes of the moment. What was the mute secret of this room?

Think as he might, search as he might, the same haze of hideous intangibility remained thick over it all. Another haze—the blue one of dusk—creeping across the park, found him still staring into the blank eyes of the mystery. All through those

last twenty-four hours he had been drawn on and baffled at every turn.

He abandoned it—for that day, at any rate. He sat down at Spartan Loder's writing-table and wrote swiftly a long letter. It was addressed to Mr Crewe, the lawyer in London, and it ended with these words :

"We are face to face here with a deep and growing horror. More than all, I realise that in taking that journey which ended here, I have unwittingly brought a shadow into the life of a pure and sensitive woman—my late uncle's ward. I must be cleared in her eyes. For her sake, more than for my own, I intend that the mystery shall be stripped away in every detail. What, in my present position, would you counsel me to do that need not appear in every newspaper in the land?"

He waited until it was definitely dark, and then slipped quietly out to find Felcote town and post the letter with his own hands. He found it easily, and walked twice along the straggling main street. More than once he had to smile inwardly, as passers-by turned breathlessly to stare after him, or a fugitive whisper shot past his ear. He was past feeling the thrill of an unpleasant leap into notoriety. And then, of a sudden, he realised that another night had really come—that the shop windows were darkening one by one. He turned back out of Felcote with the impression that it was a picturesque little town only marred by one thing—its inhabitants.

The hall clock hands stood at half-past nine when he reached the house again. Sophie, the pleasant-

faced maid who answered his ring, had something to say, and gabbled through it nervously.

"If you please, Mr Spurr, I was to be sure and say that Mrs Saxon has taken train across to Barrowdene on business, and might be a little late, if you don't mind, sir. The last local train from there is always behind time, sir. The fly will bring her from Felcote. I think that was all I had to say, sir."

She could know nothing, but the hastiness with which she fled back for the servants' quarters struck an involuntary chill through him. They would watch him from somewhere, of course. He stood smoking for a while, in a hush so complete that he could well-nigh have fancied himself alone in the big house. Then, quite automatically, without any thought of sleep, he turned to go up to his own room. He had a question to fight out in this silence—a question that he had stubbornly held at bay till now.

Was Miss St John's indisposition a woman's white lie? Was she, for some reason that time alone could prove, playing a part as only an actress could play it? Had she followed him along the coffin-like paths of the maze that day? If so—if so—God knew, he could never trust the light in a woman's eyes again!

His room lay in the western corridor, that branched to the right from the head of this main staircase. He had reached the top stair and paused, looking around. He would never know why—never know the name of the moment's vague instinct—but he took a few steps along that corridor to the left. He had heard no sound, no

footfall upon the soft carpet ; but he was just in time to feel the strangest sensation of his life—in time to see a figure, white, slow-moving, Ophelia-like, emerge from the branch passage, and stand still there.

It was Sheba—Sheba St John.

No sound would pass the man's lips. Perhaps not ten yards lay between himself and the figure. He could never be mistaken—a lamp hung from its chain just above her head. It was Sheba.

Now she had moved an uncertain step nearer, and paused again, her hand half put out like a blind man feeling the way. Her eyes were wide open—shining with a fixed, unseeing expression. She was gazing straight past him, yet saw no one—nothing save, perhaps, the face and figure focused in her dream. The low, husky word that had risen in his throat was never to sound. He stood, rooted by a thrill of awe and wonder. He knew now. It was Sheba ; but Sheba moving in her sleep.

Another step—another. Now she was so close that he could almost feel the warmth of her body ; and not for his life could he have stirred or spoken. The white, oval, fragile face had the faintest of sad smiles ; her lips were moving in a sort of monotone.

“Dead! Dead!” He caught those two soft words—words that wrote themselves upon his memory for ever.

She would pass him ; she would float down that stair ; a cry of fear might ring through the house ; it was his duty as a man to do something—to see that no harm came to her ! A score of thoughts

passed through him in so many flashes, and faded as quickly. Sheba had put a hand to her eyes, as if struggling to recall her purpose; and now she was turning in the same uncertain way. All unconsciously, the man's feet moved him in the same direction.

Once more she paused in that same spot, by the branch corridor. Her wide blank eyes were turned towards a door farther along—the door of the room that had been Spartan Loder's. A slow, quiet, haunting whisper reached him; a whisper never to be forgotten if he lived a hundred years.

"She is here. I have seen her. She is here yet. She opened my door, and stole across, and bent over me. And God told me. . . . She knows all, but will never speak. Never speak!"

It was as if a wire had coiled tightly in Wilfred Spurr's brain. He had shot out a hand, and dared it almost before he knew, his own voice curiously calm.

"She knows all? She is here? Tell me her name!"

A long, quivering sigh ran down the slight, white figure. Then the subdued breath came again, as if she were answering the voice in her dreams.

"I know it—I know it now. She could tell all. Hush! listen!"

For a minute he stood transfixed, watching her lifted hand, listening with her for something that would never sound. Then, as the hand went slowly down, he risked the low, concentrated words again.

"If you know that, tell me her name!"

No! She looked beyond him a moment longer, and then, softly as a breath of summer wind, she was moving back the way she had come—along that branch corridor. And nothing, even in such a moment, gave him the right to follow farther.

In her sleep! And no one but he might ever know!

"She is here yet! . . . She knows all! . . . She will never speak!" over and over he repeated the haunting words, and then his own: "Who? What is her name?"

He was staring ahead, echoing those words still, when a door clicked gently farther down the corridor. He had but just time to slip back on an impulse from the lamplight into shadow. Out from that doorway leaned a face. It looked both ways intently. A second, and it was gone. It had seen nothing, it had come like an answer to his question.

The face of a woman whom he had almost forgotten that day. *She* was here still—Sister Judith Cottrell!

It meant nothing—nothing—he told himself, as he stood out with that deep breath. That sudden surge of vague sensation in him was due to unstrung nerves—born of the moment's queer coincidence. Nature's warning! In seven days he had known only a few hours of sleep. He was losing a hold upon his sanity. It must be that—could only be that! He, of all men. . . .

He flung off all the stealth suddenly, squared his shoulders, strode forward, and tapped firmly at that door.

CHAPTER XIII

THERE was no answer. He drummed with his knuckles again, and knew that a rustle had sounded—knew that she had heard. But no voice came back.

At that moment it seemed monstrous. It maddened him ; it was like a conspiracy of silence. He went to speak, but a sort of three-cornered lump had sprung into his throat. She should answer him ! This growing sense of constraint and concealment was suffocating him. He snatched at the door-handle, turned it, and pushed. It yielded. He strode straight in.

And she was there, within a few feet of him as he paused.

She had changed her grey habit for a black one, and knelt by the table, her head down upon clasped hands. Praying? He would have stepped back without a word. He had surprised her in a look of dry-eyed, defiant intensity and dread that sent a tingle of reaction through him. But in the same instant she was upon her feet, self-possessed, drawn up like a queen of tragedy—utterly different from the grey, silent woman who had stood back with folded hands from Mr Loder's bedside. * She had been simply the nurse then ; she was simply the woman now.

"This—this is my private room, Mr Spurr Until I go, to-morrow——"

"To-morrow?" He echoed it involuntarily. "But you will not! Who says so? You cannot go like that, until we know what—until some understanding——"

"You are in my private room, Mr Spurr," she said again, in a low, deep note of her voice that was like a harp wire set vibrating. "Last night, if you remember, you entered it quite by error—or I assume so. It is not error to-night!"

"But—but—Miss Cottrell, am I completely——"

"Don't! I know what is in your mind. You are thinking me Delilah. You have avoided me, until you could do so no longer. Don't! I cannot bear more than I have already suffered here. I was mad—mad, to speak to you last night as I did—to hint in pity that I could help you. I know now. I am going. You have but to say the word. Fling me out like a woman who has schemed. I can bear that—but not this. You insult me, by coming in this way, knowing what you know. And you insult yourself—forcing yourself to play a part on my account. You shall not!"

It had begun in staccato gasps, as her breast rose and fell. It was as if the soul of a woman had been in travail—travail that no one outside that room was to suspect. She had calmed suddenly again. She was pointing to the door behind.

He stared; he could not take his eyes from her passionless pale face, in which the grey eyes seemed to expand and expand. All that he had come to say slipped from his mind. He simply knew that as a man, after hearing those words, he could not

turn and go as he had come. But his jaws worked soundlessly. He could do nothing but put a hand to his forehead and wonder if the mental mechanism within had ceased to act. And still she stood statue-like—a woman who waited.

"Delilah? You?" he forced out, in a whisper. "I don't understand. I came—I came because——"

She took a quick step. She held both his wrists in a resolute grip. Close into his eyes she looked, as if she had some duty to perform, and would not shrink.

"You don't understand? You have never had to enter into a woman's thoughts? You know nothing of the type of woman who can weep for the agony of others, but never for her own? I tried—I did all I could to pave the way for you. I told you that I had been misjudged here, and ever should be. Now you force me to speak. And I will!—even if you despise me for it. For I would sooner—ay, sooner bear that than take your love on such conditions! . . . You need not lie to me now! I knew you would come to me—knew it must be. I was hoping that I could leave the house before you fully realised. But that was not to be! And now shall I go on?"

"Go on!" Spurr whispered, as her hands fell away. There was no fear that he would not listen. He was like a man held by hypnotic influence, lost to all but the voice of the woman who had induced it.

"I kept my silence—kept it for weeks, against his wish. I gave up my rest, in fear that he might speak of it. I kept them all from his room as

much as possible—as they will tell you in their contemptible indignation. They hated me; they could not know what I was suffering, and I could never tell them. One man, and one alone, knew of the sword over me—and I appealed to his manhood. Doctor Lancing! The money was nothing, nothing! I had no need of it. But the knowledge that a dying man's last wish—the thought that he had compelled my promise to give myself to a man whom I had never seen, and who might despise me if I kept it——” She looked away, the slim fingers knotted at her throat.

Spurr drew a long, deep breath; but he could not stir. The atmosphere of this room seemed more stifling every moment, but he must endure it. A woman was baring her inmost heart, and as yet only the faintest glimmer of light wavered through his darkness. It was all consonant with the shroud of mystery that had enveloped him as he entered Felcote.

“I do not despise you. I have no cause,” he said, with difficulty. “Will you go on? I wish it. If there is something I must know, let me know, Miss Cottrell!”

She had been turning away, as if stung to the depths by something in his chill attitude. She faced him again, speaking in rapid, concentrated breaths, her eyes flickering defiance.

“Go on? Why should I? You are playing with a woman's susceptibilities—testing something that any true man holds as sacred before it becomes his own. You knew! You have heard! You put it off until the last moment, when all the household was asleep. You had guessed that I

might be gone to-morrow to escape this humiliation at your hands—yes! You feared that my pride would lead me to take that final step before you had spoken. Your look, your first words, showed it, as you entered this room unbidden—unbidden! Yesterday I made my great effort. I tried to appear as if I knew nothing—as if I had no cause to feel shame or shrink from you as the man whose life was to be chained to mine. But I could keep it up no longer. Let me go! Give me the paper that Mr Loder wrote his words upon—let me destroy it, and set you free! Don't fear; Doctor Lancing would never speak; it would be buried for ever between our three selves! I can do all that, and pass out of your life as I came into it. I want no man's forced love—a love that is to be a halter about his neck! But to stand here and have to speak, to know that you avoid and loathe me because your uncle chose to think of me as a ministering angel in his pain—to remain in this house with the man to whom Mr Loder gave me as a wife without my woman's wish or consent——”

The hard sob shook her from head to foot. She went back from him, her straining arms put out, her teeth clenched upon the rest.

A pause. Such a pause! Through Wilfred Spurr's brain there went boom after boom of sound, as if waves were beating against the house foundations. Afterwards he could recollect, as the booming sound died down, looking around the room and noting an inner door in the corner—the door that would lead into Miss Cottrell's sleeping apartment. He recollected that his

thoughts veered back to Sheba St John—wondered vaguely if she had reached her room in safety, and how long it could be since he had ascended that staircase to go to his own. Then he found himself speaking, quietly, tensely, without bitterness.

“You say that I *knew*? Do I appear—am I acting like a man who knows that the woman facing him is placed in such a position as you suggest? Answer that!”

“You knew!” she repeated faintly. “What else could I think? You have seen the paper; you know what he had written—what his death-bed desire was. Or you have heard it from Doctor Lancing. I waited—I waited all day, fearing the moment, and yet knowing it was my woman’s duty to let you speak. For—for unless you obeyed him the money was left away from you. And, for all I could know, you might accuse me of being something less than a woman if I robbed you of that, by—by refusing to take you on those conditions. You knew! If not, if not—God help me! God help me for being the first to tell you! The shame of it! Oh, strike me down if you will—free yourself of me in that way! I have no wish to live—to take love that is love in name only!”

“Miss Cottrell!” He could say it warningly, imploringly. He glanced back to know that the door was quite closed. He put out his hand almost calmly. “One moment! I ask you to be calm—I expect it. Put yourself in my place to-night, and——”

She had been moving toward that inner door.

She faced round slowly, her face stony, accusing, and hopeless, her pale lips twitching.

"No; put yourself in mine! If I were what you are thinking me, I could bear it. But not when I know it was unsought—that I had kept my silence an hour too long because I had hoped and prayed that you might never know of his wish. No! There is a limit even to woman's endurance, and you bring me to it—bring me to it to-night! Let me go!"

It died off. She was feeling out to find the wall—her shaking hands just missed it. He must step instantly from the room, or he must remember the traditions of his sex.

He sprang. He put one hand to her swaying figure, and caught her groping fingers with the other.

"Don't!" he begged huskily, for some unknown reason shaken to the depths of his man's nature. "For God's sake, don't let me have more on my mind to-night! Whatever it all means—whatever is to happen—don't make it harder to bear now. If I have said anything, done anything, to wound you, forget it. You shall!"

The long quiver that answered shocked him, silenced him. What was he doing? Holding almost tenderly in his arms the woman who had waited for him to loathe her—the woman who, if his ears had heard aright in this hour, had been thrust upon him as his soul mate for all eternity—Judith Cottrell, his uncle's nurse!

"Judith Cottrell!" he echoed sunkenly to himself. She lay passive in his embrace. It was almost as if Fate had worked to bring about

naturally the consummation that the dead man had desired!

Low into her eyes, that had opened slowly to window back his own, he stared. And she seemed to divine his thoughts. The faintness was beaten back. She struggled free.

"No—no! I ask no pity! You despise me for what I could not help, and always must. I can go!"

"I do not. Before Heaven to-night, I do not!" Reckless now, he held her back from the inner door as by some unratified right. The muffled drums of destiny were beating in this moment; all conventionality, all artificial restraint, must go. "Will you hear me? If these are your rooms, you have a perfect right to remain in them; you are not going because of me. Now! Do I understand that Mr Loder expressed a wish that I should think of you as my promised wife? You mean that my own uncle, whom I was not to see alive, left a paper giving me his money on that stipulation? Then, I swear to you that I know nothing of it. I swear to you, as frankly as I could have done yesterday, that I should never dream of accepting money which held any self-respecting woman to such a bondage as—as the bondage of my arms in marriage!"

The tremor had passed. She was silent, with a strange silence. The fathomless grey eyes looked past him as at handwriting upon the wall there. Slowly, step by step, Spurr went back. He was sure of himself now. He had not even attempted to realise.

"You are quite safe! You need never have

feared for my thoughts—or the world's thoughts. Where is the paper? He gives you to me? By what right? How could I dream of looking to you to accept a loveless marriage, even for the greatest fortune known? Don't be silent—I would sooner you struck me in the face for that mere suggestion!"

"Loveless—yes!" She fastened upon that word. She repeated it to herself, as she stood there so still, all the vehemence gone. "You ask me how, and why? I can only answer you in truth—I can only say that he never seemed to fear that the love would not come to you!"

Her voice had sunk almost to nothing. Something in her waiting attitude, in her sudden passivity, seemed to send a tremor through the man in turn. He went back yet another step, his tone almost cold.

"Then he wronged you—wronged us both. Let it end here, between us, to-night. Let the weight of it slip from you. For no one need ever know. If such a paper exists——"

"If?" she repeated, between teeth that had come together. "If? What can you mean? It was there. He wrote it with his own hand. Doctor Lancing saw it, and will tell you so. It cannot be concealed. The evil is wrought, and can never be undone—not in that way!"

Not in that way! The soft words reached him with a significance that no man could mistake. Her eyes watched him—watched him as if ready to light up with tender passion or a tigerish defiance—according to his answer. Vaguely he read it all. She had allowed herself to be carried by

eagerness just over the border-line of prudence. How much of it might be true, how much of it might be the effort of a superb actress whom he could admire while he scorned, he would not stay now to ask himself. He was perfectly calm now, but he was upon the one firm strip of ground in a quaking morass. He kept his face a mask. He bowed courteously.

"Set your mind at rest, Miss Cottrell. I shall respect as a sacred confidence what you tell me to-night. I am prepared to learn that my late uncle's perversion of ideas did not stop at that; in fact, I am prepared for anything that could happen. Doctor Lancing can act according to his own discretion. I will speak for myself. Should such a paper come to light in due course it will be torn to pieces—as it deserves to be!"

"And his money—ah!" She had put out the long white arms as if unconsciously. The sharp breath flashed from her lips like a finality. "What of that? I am to go, knowing that I have robbed you of that!"

"Not at all! You are to remain here as long as you wish—as long as is necessary to your purposes. Forget all the rest! Any court of law would find that such a paper had been dictated or written by a person not mentally responsible. I will not keep you longer. I came to this room—I came——"

He paused. No—no; he could never say now what he had knocked to say. And she saw it. She had rustled close as his hand reached for the door. Inward despair will sweeten the coldest face. It transfigured Judith Cottrell's face at that

moment, as she put her hands upon his shoulders and whispered :

"You have lied, to spare my feelings. Own that! Be a man to-night, as I am a woman! You came here with another purpose, but your courage failed you. You had not expected I should have taken it so to heart. Speak!"

"I can speak, and quite truthfully," he replied, his own hands drawn back. "I meant to say that I feared Miss St John was ill—that she had been left alone in her room. You, as a capable nurse, were the first person I turned to in a difficulty—as you asked me yesterday to do. That is all!"

"All!" she breathed. She stood so that he could not turn. "*Shall* I go? *Do* you wish to be rid of me in your heart? Say it, at once!"

"What do you imply?" he whispered. He was growing sterner, and yet he felt himself weakening under those eyes.

"You know! Tell me what it is to be between us. As I am placed, you must. It is my woman's right—you shall!"

"Well, then"—he put back her arms steadily—"if what I have said is not sufficient, I can only add that it rests between yourself and Miss St John how much longer you remain in this house—her house!"

He went out. He would not look back. The clear air of the corridor seemed to fan him like a cold wind; he felt like one who had stood in a drugged chamber. He had turned down the western passage. His hand was upon the door of his own room when he heard that swift rustle

of skirts and the staccato, commanding breath behind :

“Mr Spurr! One last word! Hear this!”

He could have feigned a deafness, and escaped ; but it was not in him to think of that. He swerved round. She had followed him—paused by the window some feet away, through which a shaft of the moonlight struck across her face. A queer sensation crawled through the man’s veins—a prescience of trouble deeper than he could realise to-night. He found himself listening in sick fear for the opening of some door, to tell him that her words had been overheard.

“One word!” she panted. “It rests with *you*, and you alone. You have my heart’s secret—wrung from me in that moment of weakness. If you hate me utterly for coming here to say that, remember that it was you who led me to—to know that I had a heart!”

He was dumb. He could only wait for the next withering, entreating breath :

“You—you allowed me to speak—to think that you knew all! You spoke last night as though—as though you understood. God! how shall I put it? And then you thought again. You had seen another woman’s face here. Need I name her? You had seen the face of a woman who had set herself—pledged herself—to gain your affections. Yes; you have led me into the most terrible position that a woman can know. And now I am to go!”

One more pause. Then the man found his voice, and answered.

“So be it, Miss Cottrell. Perhaps it would be

best for all concerned—best if we let this matter end as it began. I have nothing more to say—although until this happened I had much to say to you upon other questions. Let them go! I am honestly sorry if I ever gave you cause to take up this attitude. That is all.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “You’re a man; you can forget it all to-morrow! I’m a woman—I never shall!”

For one last moment she stood facing him, the moonlight playing over her half-smiling, scornful face. Then—then the swish of her gown was dying away down the corridor.

No one had heard. No one would be likely to know. And yet—the words had been spoken, and could never be taken back!

CHAPTER XIV

GLOAMING! Gloaming, filled with the scent of stacked hay and sweetbrier, heavy with the breath of folding poppies—divinely hushed save for an occasional distant gunshot or rattle of wheels, the laugh of homing workmen, the bay of a hound in some covert.

Away inland, the furnace chimneys at Barrowdene were sending up crimsoning pillars of smoke against the sky. Here, down in the hollow, Felcote lamps were beginning to twinkle and cast shadows; but from that picturesque point where the road took its first dip downwards, softest amber glory could still be seen dying behind the woods. Its reflection caught upon a stately red-brick villa with white facings, standing in splendid isolation well back from the main road. Words cut into a burnished name-plate could be clearly read—"Doctor Gilbert Lancing."

And a woman had paused to read them.

Tall and slender, with the swift, sinuous grace of refinement, and walking as with a fixed purpose, she had halted close against the brier hedge in front. Her intent gaze moved along to the wide bay window on the left. A flame of light had just shot up in there, and for an instant the interior of the room was laid bare. Then some hand had let slip a rose-coloured blind and shut it out.

The watching woman half turned, one hand

plucking meditatively at the strip of velvet around her throat, her thin lips curved in the suggestion of a bitter smile. Then—then a tremble had run through her from head to foot.

From that wide room just eclipsed a sudden ripple of music had come. Skilful, confident fingers had swept the length of a piano keyboard. Now back again, with alternating minor chords that rang out as with a sense of power and triumph. The flood of true notes swelled and swelled, like a crescendo prelude to the outburst of some waiting choir—to glide softly into one of the simple, wailing waltz melodies. A man's voice struck in, a full, practised tenor voice.

She listened for the words, her face a study, her breast as still as though no heart beat within. Now there came a lull. She waited a minute, then caught up her skirt, took a swift little rush between rhododendron clumps toward the door, and pressed the bell-push. She put her ear to the glass panels. A man's rich voice inside, that had been rising in a laugh, broke off as the electric bell sounded. A pause; then the door went back; a trim maid appeared. The eyes of the woman outside scanned her coldly, contemptuously, through the veil meshes.

"Well!" she breathed sharply. "I cannot see your master out here!"

"Oh, I beg your pardon! Step this way, please. What—what name shall I give?"

"None! Why should you? I might be an utter stranger!"

"Yes, madam. But he—he expects me to know the name before I knock."

"Ah!" She gave a low little laugh. "Sister Judith Cottrell, you can tell him."

"Ay, of course! Excuse me for not recognising you, miss. You—you looked so different in this light!"

She disappeared. Sister Judith, always a woman who could wait, was not the one to follow her. There was a suppressed sound of voices, the soft closing of a door—two doors—and then the maid reappeared, slightly breathless.

"Could you possibly leave it for another time, miss? Doctor Lancing happens to be engaged."

"Very well! I can stand here and await his pleasure."

"I mean, it was my mistake, miss. The doctor is not in just at present."

Judith Cottrell's cold, erect figure turned in the twilight of the waiting-room. Her low, level voice gave no note of doubt or surprise.

"I see. Perhaps I will not trouble him, after all. Might I ask whose photograph that is?—whom it represents, I should say?"

The maid stared at her, turned up the light, and peered forward at a rich green plush and gilt frame over the mantelshelf.

"That? Why, isn't it Miss St John, the young lady up at the Manor?"

"Really? To be sure, yes! I thought there was a likeness, and yet I couldn't quite understand Miss St John's picture being—here. Thank you; good-evening!"

She moved out in her tranquil, self-contained way—and paused again in the same spot by the hedge. Through a still cluster of yellow roses she

watched that window on the left. Minutes passed ; she had not moved. And then of a sudden it rang out afresh—that masterful ripple along the piano keys. As if she could see the man sitting in there Sister Judith put out her hands slowly.

“Devil!” she whispered. “And devils make devils!”

Back to the house door she was sweeping. This time she used the brass knocker.

The door fell back. The maid stared into the veil.

“Thank you! Doctor Lancing is in now, and will see me.”

Just that icy, commanding little breath, and she was moving past down the passage, and had tapped at the door on the left. The watching maid stood with parted lips. Sister Judith’s manner was the manner of the Death Angel come with a call.

“Eh?” came Gilbert Lancing’s bland voice, tinged with impatience. “What is it now?”

No answer. Sister Judith, her veil thrown up, stepped back and watched the maid. It might mean nothing ; but it was a fixed freezing expression that numbed any sound just then.

“Confound it!” rang out from the room. “I say, who is there?”

And this time the level, passionless voice replied for itself:

“Merely a woman. Someone you did not think to see.”

He took two leaps, threw back the door, and was staring down into those deep green-grey lakes—the eyes of Sister Judith Cottrell. It was a shock ; a red wave of anger ran up into his fair, delicately carved face.

"Hush!" she said quietly.

And he bit his lip, remembered himself, and bowed deeply.

"Miss Cottrell? Forgive my utter surprise and seeming rudeness!"

"Yes?" she said, watching him. "That will do very well for the servant to hear!" And he turned to the wide-eyed maid:

"Don't stand staring. My mistake—you can go!"

His consulting-room was opposite. He opened that door and went in. He tiptoed back, and beckoned. But the coldly still figure had not moved.

"Oh no, thank you!" Looking at him, she seemed to suffocate a little laugh. "I come to-night as a guest, not as a patient. At least, I *am* a patient—and it may need all your cleverness to heal me!"

His blue eyes were blank as he ushered her into the handsome room with its rose-coloured blind, its white and gold furniture, its subtle scent of Turkish cigarettes, its atmosphere of fastidious refinement. Now the door was closed, and the world shut out. He was so far lost to himself that he forgot even to push forward a chair.

Mechanically Sister Judith unclasped her dust-cloak. It slid down to her feet with a silken rustle. She stood with her back to him, in the attitude of one whose purpose was so deep that for the moment she would not trust herself to speak. Possibly, too, there was a back-rush of memories too exquisitely bitter-sweet to be mastered in an instant.

Then she slowly wheeled round, with a low, smiling irony that cut the silence like a knife.

"Yes; you shall receive me for once as, not so hopelessly long ago, you would have given up your hope of hereafter to receive me. And it may depend upon you to-night whether I choose to bury all my illusions in one grave, or whether I drive you out of Felcote and follow you over the world like the shadow of my dead self. For once in your golden career you will leave your bed of down. You are face to face now with a woman whom you took to the edge of a precipice and hoped to leave there. Understand, Gilbert?"

"It is plain enough for a beginning!" he said, clearing something from his throat.

He stood, as if watching a claw that lay sheathed in velvet. She was glancing around his room, her lips curving as she took in its superb, artistic modernity. Then, as if to break the strain, he moved towards a table. A dish of walnuts lay there; he placed one between the silver nutcrackers. And the crackling sound at such a moment seemed to send a blasting flame of passion through the woman's body. With a moan she swerved round to face him, stripped of all her self-possession, her voice thin and strained.

"Speak! You threatened me, once; threatened me in your man's superior strength! Speak to me now as a woman who has fought and suffered till there is only one alternative to death itself! How dared you deny me—you!"

"I had to. I thought it wisest—for your own sake," was the careful reply.

The fear of something had given him back the deadly coolness that was his chief asset. He was able now to look straightly at her.

"What!" she had breathed, creeping nearer till her breath struck upon his face. He seemed to know that, did he flinch, the gloved hand would strike where her breath had struck. "What! How dared you shut me out with the paltriest lie in existence! What am I but what you have made me? What is there in me that you would fear to discover in—in a woman whom you hoped to marry? Speak!"

"When you are calm, I will." He flicked a speck from his snowy arch of shirt-front, from the centre of which flashed a tiny diamond. "Where a woman allows herself to speak in such terms a man may be pardoned if he forgets her sex. I left things going on very smoothly, I thought; I had done my part. The risk I ran in saving you from discovery in the plantation was enough for one lifetime, I think!"

"And mine was nothing! I risked nothing in stealing back from his pocket at dead of night the thing that might have damned you—no! Your risk was taken in mortal fear. Mine was inspired by the thought that, whatever you are to-day, you are the man who once stole the bloom from my cheeks! There, take it!" She threw down the snapped fragment of gold chain. "Yes; put it in your desk—make sure of it! And make sure of my silence before I leave this house!"

"Why did you come here?" he blurted out thickly. "What have I done that you should jeopardise my position by this mad, melodramatic visit?"

"You have done nothing—nothing! And your inaction was a more despicable crime than your

worst action. You thought to drop me, like a bad memory. You have burned all my letters without answering them. Once you knew I had failed, you had no further use for me. You hoped that I should vanish from the scene altogether. You denied me just now because you feared me!"

"Fear!" he sneered. "You, of all women, should know that I have a professional etiquette to guard here. I am not a slave to anyone who chooses to ring my door-bell. I had given the maid certain instructions, and she was bound to abide by them."

"Bound to lie to order—yes!" she whispered, with a strange little laugh. "We are all on one level—all liars—I am aware; but even a liar can pick his method. Not that I am in the least surprised. A fire once dead can never be fired into life again. Yet, if I were a man in your place to-night, I should writhe to hear any woman flinging such a taunt of meanness in my face. Being an artist, and so clever, you feel the sting!"

"Silence—or go! If you dare to——"

"Hush!" She put up her hand with a scorn so deep that it had acted like oil upon the surge of her own passion. "Not another word on that point. You threatened me once before; you can never do it again. I am a different woman now. I know now why you so soiled your white hands by contact with a felony; why you took advantage of the unexpected; why you implored me—commanded me—to decoy that man into marriage before another woman could do it. It was not that you needed money; it was not that you hungered to see me the contented wife of a

rich man—oh, no! But that little dream is over. I have failed. We stand to-night—you and I—as we stood before. Come! Sit down at that piano, and play! Ripple those white fingers up and down the keys as you were doing when that woman in the way, Judith Cottrell, listened from the roadway! Play to me, as only one man in Felcote can play! Sing something!” She touched his arm, almost appealingly. “Sing ‘Do you remember?’”

“You are out of your mind!” he breathed, his hands clenched.

“No; I mean it. I was never more sane.” She stooped and picked up the dust-cloak. “See! you have trampled upon it. Is that a symbol? I mean it all, I tell you. I have no longer any need to keep up a pretence. That other man, whom I was to marry, has shown me in his eyes what he thinks of me. I fall back upon my original purpose—upon you. The other was only a superb make-believe; but this is real. You put the first vile thought into my heart, years ago; you are responsible now for my future.”

“Pooh!” he whispered. But he was very white now.

“No, Gilbert, not ‘pooh!’ Try and realise something deeper. Whatever has happened to kill every vestige of my faith in men, to freeze my heart against all the world, do not lower yourself still further in the vain hope of silencing me completely. I did not come here to remind you, to plead, to appeal to your manhood; far from it—I am past all that! If you knew what is in my mind at this moment, you might shudder. I don’t

know yet that I shall tell you. Can you give a guess?—you, with your quick brain, that has read so many women's minds? Try!"

Full into the pale blue eyes she stared, as if determined to see them wince. And the strangest smile broke slowly over her pallid features. His finesse was gone—his very voice traitorous. The reply had rattled hopelessly in his throat.

"Ah!" she said, on that deep, harp-like note. "You are a different man from him—the man I was to marry at any price. Your courage, your polish, is a thin veneer. Now the ice is broken, and we see beneath. Just listen to this! There is in nearly every woman a measure of badness—desperate resource in an emergency. It lies deep, is seldom suspected, and may never make itself felt unless some man's utter selfishness has called it forth. I never respected you—I realise it now. I was a fool ever to allow myself to care for you, to let you dazzle my truer instincts—to let you lead me on to this precipice. It has gone now; I have put it all away; were you to fall upon your knees and beg me to forget, I should smile! But the sting of the memory is alive still, and it must account for all. I can never be a trusting woman again, with a woman's precious illusions! Never! I must suspect everyone of a motive. I must always recollect that I could play the part of Delilah to perfection. There is no real warmth, no life, in the sunshine for me; every day might be grey and sad, for all I notice. There is no future—only the past. Oh, God, when a woman loses all faith and hope!"

To and fro over the white drugget she had been

moving, the cloak trailing and rustling behind her. She came to a dead pause quite close, her half-closed eyes seeming to read under their lashes into his very soul.

“And, after all is said, the woman is always brought back to that one point—what does it matter to the man? And then her heart hardens again, and suggests a step further, and so the work goes on. You!—what do you care at this moment? What will you whisper when I am gone? Two words, maybe—‘Damn her!’ And then you will take an extra glass of something from the sideboard, and curl your moustache, and go about smilingly to meet the world that believes in you. And to-morrow—you will laugh at the comedy of last night! How little you understand my long fight against myself—against this gnawing, growing hunger for revenge—my approaching revenge upon the woman to whom I owe it all!”

CHAPTER XV

GILBERT LANCING, the most successful man in Felcote, held his breath until the muffled shriek of a distant flying train had died away. Then he walked stiffly to the door, glanced out, listened for awhile, and closed it again. It had gained him the time he required. If a growing fear palpitated beneath his bland insouciance she was not to see it.

"Now!" he said. "I have heard you out, I hope. And just possibly others have heard something of it, too. Very well! Whether you know it or not, you came here to-night to terrorise me—perhaps to blackmail me. To show you how frightened I am I have taken the key from that door. I'm going to keep you a little longer. While you are unbosoming yourself, you shall go a little further. You shall make it clear in what way Gilbert Lancing has ever wronged Judith Cottrell!"

"How suavely, now neatly he can put it!" she said, half to herself. "The professional polish is over all! Some women might be tempted to admire you still, spite of themselves!"

"But not you—eh? You are too deep, too far gone, for that; you have owned it. I want an answer to my question before you leave this house to do your mischief. Then, perhaps, you will see to what extent the man cares!"

"I understand." The calm, unnerving little laugh, a new thing in itself upon her lips, went

across the white and gold room. "You think you can brave it out. You want to be sure there is nothing to link my actions with your suggestions. I have played my part wrongly again! I should have held myself in check yet a little longer; it left you secretly uneasy—uncertain as to the extent of my hold upon you. But now that I have spoken out and defied you, I make you at once master of the situation. A woman who drops her mantle of pride, and begs bare justice from the man who owes but cannot be compelled to give it, becomes at once a thing of the past in his eyes. No; you have never wronged me! Let your listeners hear that. Wronged? It is only the empty word a woman uses when she realises that her life is to be a hell of struggle to forget!"

"Pshaw!" He tilted back his head and laughed right out. "That will do! That talk is obsolete—this is a night in the twentieth century! You can go!"

She watched him as he sauntered across to a sideboard, where lay an open box of cigars. He picked one out, and crackled it critically against his ear.

"Was it one of those that you smoked in the plantation that night?" she asked quietly. "Do you think he would recognise the scent again? Do you think that, strange as he was to the place, he had any suspicions? He may even have guessed it was himself I was to marry, eh?"

"I am not listening," he said, as he struck a match.

The cigar was never to reach his lips. A hand suddenly dashed it away; the same hand swept

down and scattered the boxful. She trampled upon all within her reach, and he dared not prevent the ruin. He quailed palpably as she swung him round—as the blazing grey eyes stared into his.

“There! You shall listen now! Your question shall be answered in full! Wronged me? No; that world outside would laugh at the bare idea. You simply singled out for your amusement the quiet young nurse who came fresh to the hospital where you first practised. It was never to be considered serious love on your part—only a ghastly, grotesque mistake on the part of the woman for seeing it in that old-fashioned light! You merely wanted to gain scientific experience in the vagaries of the feminine nature—the eternal mystery! When your coolness deepened into aversion it was my place to accept the inevitable. Have I not done that——”

“Be still!” he put in hoarsely. “You’ll make me forget——”

She struck away his arm, and went on in rapid breaths:

“Have I not done that as no woman ever did it before? Have I not passed you on the staircases, stood facing you in the sickroom, and never once tried to thrill you with a look or a whisper of what *had* been? Reply to that! Has anyone in all Felcote the faintest suspicion that you once held my hands in the twilight, and drew me to you—— But enough! I have fought night and day to maintain the icy indifference. I succeeded; but the process has destroyed all that is noblest and best in a woman. And you—you have the shadow

of that fact at your door for ever. You realise what I mean?"

"I realise that you are mad," he whispered again. He had tried to smile, but the shine of sweat was on his handsome face now.

"I succeeded," she repeated; "but you were never worth a particle of the martyrdom. And at times a flame of fire leaps up within me—ah, it would frighten you to see my face then, Gilbert! It did to-night, when I stood out there and heard you playing so brilliantly, so carelessly. You were quite safe, you thought. You had led me into such a position that I could not expose you without exposing myself; you could play and sing to pass the time. Once more, I abhor you to-night for that most despicable of all things in a man—complacent selfishness! And yet, listen to this! It is so strange!—and yet something has drawn me to wonder what there could be in another woman that I never possessed. Something has brought me here, determined to *know*. It is I who have asked a question, and I who will wait for a reply!"

She moved back. The cloak was flung far from her once again; she stood, defiant, her face hard and haggard with the long pent-up scorn and agony of the loveless woman.

"Yes; look at me well," she whispered. "See what a change seven years may work in a woman! Take your time; no one has called to see you; no one would dream of disturbing a great doctor in his privacy! I am going to bring you to your knees, and soon you will know why. Come! This other woman—what is the secret of her lasting

spell over you? Is it because some superior insight has enabled her to value you at your true worth? I wonder!"

"Judith, be warned!" he could only mutter sunkenly. And she lifted her finger.

"Hark! he called me 'Judith'! That was a voice from the dead—a voice that I knew years ago. 'Judith'!"

"Will you go?" He flung up a shaking arm. "If you wish to ruin me here, knowing that that bell might ring at any moment——"

"Bah! you would recover your nerve in one second! Answer my question! This other woman—this wonderful woman—I want to know all about it!"

"Her name!" he said, with a desperate effort to be cool. "I don't fear your jealousy. If you can name any woman, do so!"

"Her picture is there, Gilbert, in your waiting-room. Mine is not."

"Ah, I see!" He paced a step or two, and stood with his back to the light. "I thought as much. And a dozen other pictures of ladies are there. What if Miss St John never gave me that photograph? What if I got it indirectly, and paid for an enlargement—as a mere work of art? Does that satisfy you?"

Foot by foot Judith crept forward, and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Will you tell me to-night, as you have told me before, that you have never once asked that woman to become your wife?"

He could not. His dry lips parted several times, but no word came. Not to-night.

"At last!" she whispered. "At last I have nailed down your living lie. And now your heart is to be wrung, as mine was wrung! . . . I knew! I knew; although you thought you had blinded me throughout. I heard it from her own lips, a week ago. I heard it from the same lips again, two days later, when her mind wandered in delirious dreams. And I had known it in my own heart from the first. Why did I keep so silent? Because, like a weak fool, I still had one lingering hope that I could hold you to your promise of years ago. I was alone in the world, shunned for my silence, misunderstood by all. I would have taken your name even then, love or no love, if only to spite the world that stones and sneers at the woman passed by! And—and something had happened that same night. Something that you know nothing of—something that had left me trembling and light-headed—something that made me long for once for a man's strength and brain. You stare? Ay, you will live to wonder yet at your own blindness that night. I made you wait for me in the plantation. I asked you once more if you were working in the dark to win another woman. And once more you calmly lied to me. You were putting a rope around your own neck. I told you that I had found out something—that the man just arrived in Felcote was to be rich. And what was your inspiration—your answer? 'Marry him! There is your life chance! Gain his heart before he finds out—before another woman forestalls you!' And I took you at your word—never mind why! I sank myself utterly, and lied, and schemed. It was my last supreme

bid for a position in life—for revenge upon the the world. And it failed. And now——”

“And now——” he echoed in an unconscious whisper, in that thick pause while her hand felt at her throat.

“Never mind! I was a changed woman from that moment; I keep my own counsel now. Just this! You don’t believe it yet, but, unless something happens, you have lost your Sheba. How I can feel for you, coward as you are!”

Her voice, low and lifeless again now, carried conviction. He could no longer meet her eyes; he was looking around, as if for a way of escape. She was driving home a cold truth that he had determined not to realise. All concealment was at an end now. The veneer had cracked.

“And I owe it to you!” he got out, his voice thin with passion. “That is your revenge. I owe to you every word that has been used to poison her against me!”

“Oh no! Small need of that, friend! You had never even made an impression upon her woman’s thoughts. True, many a woman has ended by loving the very man she loathed at first sight, and quite possibly the persistence of a man like Gilbert Lancing might have—— Hush, listen!” She put up her hand slowly. Through the silence of the night outside came the sound of a muffled beating of drums—a volunteer company passing along the Felcote road. “The drums!” Judith said, as to herself. “The drums of fate—your fate and mine!” The sound died. She roused as from a reverie, “Yes; your last hope is going down in the scales. The sudden fear of it showed in your face, in your

voice, when you impressed upon Mrs Saxon the vital necessity that Miss St John should be kept to her room for a week. A week! You did it cleverly—you saw your chance in a flash. By that time the funeral would be over, and a certain person might have gone back to his own business—for a time, at anyrate. And every minute that saved your hope of Sheba was precious beyond words!”

For a moment he stared at her in real amazement. Then wave after wave of crimson surged up into his delicately cut face. That soft irony of hers had gone to the deepest depths in him.

“You’re not a woman—you’re a spy!” rattled in his throat. “You have been that from first to last in that house—a paid spy! I wish to God, at this moment, that I had never breathed your name as a nurse to Mr Loder!”

“I quite believe it. It was a cheap, a tactical, kindness on your part; and maybe it has helped to make Felcote history. Let that pass now. Enough that I intentionally overheard your instructions, and read their inner meaning. Yes, you’re deep; you scented the possibility of new danger at once. You hope to get her away from Felcote, do you not? In any case, you contrived to keep her as long as possible from contact with the man who *is* a man, and therefore dangerous—Wilfred Spurr!”

Quite still he stood, watching. She had chosen this strange moment of uncertainty to pick up her cloak, draw it deliberately around her, and hold out her hand for the key he still clutched. His fingers yielded it involuntarily; the woman was the master now. She was going!

She had reached the door. She half turned to look back at him, her own face as composed and colourless as ever it had been.

"One word of warning," she said quietly. "I would not go too far in that eagerness of yours. No doubt you worship the very carpet she moves across; but it might not be wise to risk a scandal just now. Don't you see, Gilbert? This Wilfred Spurr is watching events very keenly. I see more than you can. He may act upon his own initiative. Another doctor, called in quietly, might well wonder what your object could be in purposely deadening the girl's grip upon external things!"

"A lie!" He started forward—came to a trembling standstill again. "You dare to hint that! She needed all I have prescribed. She had not slept for days; she was in a state of utter collapse. You know it—you call yourself a nurse!"

"As you will," was the unmoved reply. "Five of the days are gone, and nothing has happened. Yes; the Fates are working with you, so far—and so, too, maybe, is Judith Cottrell. In a few days more, as far as I can gather, Wilfred Spurr must leave to attend to his farms abroad. What may happen before his return will, of course, depend greatly upon your brain—and upon my will."

One more pause, as for reflection. The man had not moved. His own power for thought seemed to have gone. He could only watch her lips with strained eyes. And presently they parted again.

"And now you can go back to your piano. You can put it all out of your mind. You can go on picturing yourself at the altar with sweet, dainty

Sheba. Not that the picture will ever be realised . . . unless . . ."

It died off. Steadfastly past him she was looking. It was as if she had timed her bolt for this moment, to bring him nearer—humbled, pleading, slavish, in spite of all that had gone before. And it drew him.

"Unless——" he repeated incredulously. "Go on!"

"I was going to say—unless I take one more step downward and choose to make it come to pass. For you can never think worse of me than you do to-night!"

"You!" The distrust was plain in his pale blue eyes; but just as plainly he was in fear that she might slip out of his reach at this point. "You! You could help me in that!"

And Judith smiled—a wan, faint smile.

"Keep cool; don't be startled, Gilbert! Remember that I am now what a man's romantic, 'harmless' fascination has made of me. You would not expect me to bear any love for that woman who took my place—a fool's paradise though it was?"

"You hate her—yes! I know that. Go on!"

"Just this! I promise nothing; but my revenge now could come in that way—never mind why. I hold a card in the great game which can swing the pendulum either way, and which I shall show to no one. If I pledge myself that she shall not become anything more to this Spurr than she is to-day——"

"Spurr! Spurr!" He strode close, to catch

at her wrist. "What do you mean? Why should there be ever anything between them?"

"I don't prophesy," she said slowly. "Like yourself, I have had a premonition—that is all. I have already helped you once, you know. You wished that no one should enter Mr Loder's room. That was done in order to drive her to appeal to you. Yes, of course!"

"And now, you mean to blackmail me for it?"

"Oh no! I cannot explain now; for the moment you must think what you will; you would never understand what it is that sways and impels a woman like me. But, if I am willing to risk something to keep her from him, and to gain my own ends. . . . Here!"

Stealth indescribable—a brooding fatefulness—burned sleepily in her eyes as she stooped forward and closed her cold fingers upon his. It was the witchery of a sorceress—some suggestion of power and latent devilment that he had never seen in a living, breathing woman before. The blood that had been racing through his veins now only crawled, as in fear. And she seemed to know it.

"Don't speak or question or wonder; simply obey!" she said, in the lulling voice of a hypnotist. "Don't call there to-morrow, nor the next day. You understand? The lawyer from London will probably be there; you must give them a clear day for their talk. I can stay on another week—two, if I choose. Everything there is a blank—a chaos; no one knows how it is all to end, and I am only a figure in the background. You are sending Miss St John medicine this evening. Let that be the last. Give her her own free will from

to-morrow night—it will not take her far. Call the following day—Thursday—about dusk, and congratulate her upon the good effects of your advice. You may find her distant, suspicious, hysterical; but you'll be as coolly courteous as ever. Stay just long enough to remove any vague impression of design, and then——”

For the last time she paused, and seemed to be listening to an inner voice that was prompting her. He could be almost certain that she shuddered under the dust-cloak. He scarcely dared to let his voice sound.

“And then?”

“Wait! It is all dark to me as yet. I might even change my mind—I'm a woman, you know! There is something that I have to do, and dare not do alone; you shall help me. Drive away from the house as usual, and stop your car by the holly bushes, as if you had forgotten something. Don't dismiss the car; I may want it—to put miles between myself and that place. Cut across the park to the fir plantation—just as you did before. I shall be waiting for you there. Thursday! And—one last word—don't let me wait there in vain. If you do—good-bye to Sheba's kiss!”

CHAPTER XVI

"WHO is there? Who is that moving?"

"Me, Miss Sheba—Sophie! Oh, have I made a noise? Don't you know me?"

The maid, just tiptoeing away from the blind that she had lowered, drew up still, startled by the awed, quivering question that had come from that shadowy corner.

"Sophie! Here, in my room? But—what time of the night is it? Why am I lying here?"

"Lying there? Miss Sheba, you have been ill—and might have been much worse. Don't speak like that, miss; you frighten me. I was not to say anything. You are——"

"I have been ill?" It came again in the hushed voice of a child dreaming and terrified. "But—Sophie, you seem quite different—everything seems a long way back! Come here—touch my hand! Why are you trembling so? What does it all mean?"

"Don't, Miss Sheba—oh, don't! You surely know? You were taken ill that same night. You were white as this sheet—you frightened us all—your eyes were shining and strange. But I was not to let you ask questions. No; lie back—Miss Sheba—you must! I was to be sure and call Mrs Saxon before anything else!"

And Sheba, groping for the girl's hands to lift herself, fell back. She lay in the lethargy of slow

realisation. Her brain alone was at work, booming away as if just freed from some deadening influence. What had happened? Why was the house so quiet—the room so unfamiliar?

Yes; now she could recall rousing at times and feebly sipping at the cup that Mrs Saxon pressed to her lips. Mrs Saxon had seemed a fairy god-mother, and herself a child struggling to keep awake, but totally unable to do so. Little by little the incredible mist thinned out. She lay staring, ready to give a cry as her mind grasped the horror that still breathed in the background. She could hear again the housekeeper's subdued, kind voice—could it have been yesterday, or a week ago?

"Can you follow me, dearie? He is to be buried quietly in Felcote churchyard to-morrow. Everything is in good hands. You are not to be allowed to worry, doctor says. All you need is sleep."

Sleep! *was* it that? When was it that the door over there had opened, ever so softly, and a face had looked in at her? Why had she not screamed out? It had come nearer—nearer—till its breath reached her; and . . .

"Bless her! At last! And looking almost herself—thank God, yes!"

It was Mrs Saxon in physical reality. She came hurrying in with lighted candles and a suppressed fever of excitement. Stooping, she framed the clear oval face in both hands, and kissed it again and again, until it was damp with her tears.

"I may! It's as if you had come back again to life! Why, yes, dearie, don't you know? You have moved about the room in your dressing-gown; you have talked to me several times. Once you

dressed yourself and were going downstairs—I came back just in time. One part of you was awake the whole time—the other was asleep. I believe Doctor Lancing thought at one time——”

“What!” she put in, in a little panting cry. “Has he been here to—to *me*?”

“Dearie, certainly! What’s the matter? He only came twice; on the first and second day. He was most anxious—most thoughtful. You took the final draught just about twelve last night—don’t you remember pushing my arm away? And to-day, his note says, if you felt able and desirous, we were to let you move about the house just as you wished. You have lain here a week!”

Sheba lay quite still in the arms. Her fingers were tightly entwined; her dark, velvety eyes seemed to look into space for the answer to some mute question. A week!

“There, dear, not that look! Let it all come back by degrees. They never let a blind man see the light all at once after an operation, you know. You will hear all soon. Why, of course, dearie, to-day is Wednesday!”

With a determined cheerfulness Mrs Saxon stepped back to dry her eyes and busy herself at the far end of the room. There was so much to be said that she dare not begin yet. And all the time she could hear from behind that quiet echo of her own last word.

“Wednesday! Seven days—seven whole days gone from my life!”

She turned suddenly on an instinct. Sheba was not lying still between the sheets. Sheba had risen silently and, unaided, drawn on a morning

robe and slippers as with some definite purpose, and stood watching the door with a strange expression.

"Don't stop me—don't stand in my way!" she whispered, thrillingly quiet in voice and manner. "I feel much better—quite different! I shall go downstairs. I can't stay in this room—I must see for myself what it all means."

"By all means, dear, if you feel you can," breathed the startled housekeeper. "But not quite like that—you're forgetting! Now, just sip this drain of beef-tea and eat the toast; and then I'm going to bathe your face and smooth your hair, while you decide which of your black dresses you'll slip on. Why not, pray! No earthly reason why he should not meet you looking as nice and like your old self as possible! And no excitement, mind! Whatever is to happen, whatever is behind it all, we must look facts calmly in the face—as Mr Wilfred Spurr himself says!"

Sheba had sunk obediently into the chair. Something formed and broke in her throat.

"Is—is Mr Spurr here—in the house?" she asked, in the same far-away voice.

Spurr—Spurr! The name sang through her brain. One by one the facts sprang back to her, as she sat so still, her hair fallen in those waves, her eyes softly shining, the loosened robe slipping away from her fair breast and shoulders. She had emerged from a long trance, to find the world gone on without her!

"Here? Dearie, think! Certainly, he is. Just as if, acting for you, I should have allowed

anything different! Where else could he go? Certainly not into Barrowdene or Felcote, with everybody staring and pointing at him. And as for that station hotel, it's a death-trap with its draughts and damp sheets—and fierce rats, too!”

“Rats?” Sheba repeated, with a tense struggle to comprehend.

“Rats, dear! At least, so they used to say. This is his uncle's house, to be sure. I've made his room snug and comfortable with my own hands. I don't know why he preferred to stretch himself on the drawing-room couch last night—unless it has something to do with that long talk between him and Mr Crewe. Just bend your head a little, sweet—only a little!”

“Is — is Mr Crewe here, too?” came the mechanical whisper.

“Not now, dear. He walked with Mr Spurr as co-mourner—not very willingly, I'm afraid. He wouldn't stay for one night. Isn't it strange that poor Mr Loder never seemed to make one solitary friend anywhere? Ah, and stranger, too, that his nephew should be as sensitive as a woman! He went up to London on Saturday morning to see the lawyer, and hung about there till Monday—only through that sensitiveness, I feel positive. And just imagine!—he had left his trunks at Barrowdene station, and said not a word about them to anyone. And since Monday I've had harder work than ever to get him to sit down to a meal. My heart has ached for him at moments—wandering the house and grounds by himself, with no one he can seem to talk to! He's certainly thinner in face. How can you wonder? Twice

to-day I've had table set for him, and—— There, dearie, your hair looks soft and beautiful. Don't you think you might look at yourself in the glass?"

Her lips parted, her eyes closed now, Sheba sat as still as if she had not heard. Her mind was struggling back through the mist to that never-to-be-forgotten night. Try as she would, she could not seem to grasp more than the one fact of the living present. Wilfred Spurr was here—here to stay. He had stepped into the shoes of the dead. In that interval all had changed. Her head was sinking forward; the little moan was in her throat for which Mrs Saxon had intuitively waited.

Down suddenly went the housekeeper to her knees, both arms locked about the slight figure, her voice cooing softly.

"Now, my dear Miss Sheba, be a true woman; I know just what is in your heart. Put it all from you, this moment—for ever! It is the very thing he is dreading night and day—your doubt of him! For long enough it has seemed, as if the house were a dark room, so to speak; now the windows are all thrown open, and the sunlight is going to stream in! Think of him down there! He came all those miles to find himself in that terrible position. I have talked with him like a mother; I have watched his face for hours together; and *I know*. The knowledge has left me with a beating heart, I assure you; because I was secretly fearing—never mind what! One thing, dearie, while I think of it: when you see him walking up and down with his fingers locked and twisted behind him, it doesn't mean that he has ever worn

handcuffs, or anything of that, but that he wants to say something important. If he is not a gentleman, dear, you will never meet one; make up your mind to that. And his one constant wish has been that Miss St John shall not worry over anything from now!"

"But—but—keep your arms round me a little longer! I will try, but the thought is there still—the thought that perhaps——"

"Hush! We are leaving that to a Higher Power. It will all be explained in God's time. Let me tell you this: it was purest delicacy, on your account alone, that kept him from calling in the police and causing a great scandal. As I told him: to bring Felcote police here would be like letting bats loose in broad daylight!"

"I know—I know! But——" Sheba made her effort, and slowly rose—"But it cannot be kept a secret. It must be known everywhere that something terrible has happened to us——"

"Listen!" the other persisted gently. "The servants only guess at something wrong. They did not—did not see the two men here at one and the same time—no one actually saw that! But they're under *my* eye; and they know it. Doctor Lancing went off without the faintest suspicion. There remained only Sister Judith; and I asked her, for the memory of the dead master, not to speak of it to a living soul until the shadow lifted. The *real* Mr Spurr? I knew, the moment I came to my senses. If you think back, there was a totally different atmosphere about the two men—a something you can't hope to put into words yet. Dearie, you're all ready!"

The waves of brown hair were softly coiled. Sheba had drawn on a different robe, and stood still while Mrs Saxon clasped a row of pearls around her slim throat. She looked an unconsciously sweet picture, and Mrs Saxon's heart, for some subtle reason, was beating very fast just then. She whispered cheerfully :

"He is down there in the drawing-room. I—I half think he knows. I lit a fire, as it turned chilly. I try to keep him in the house as much as possible after dusk. You see, he asked at once to speak with someone in authority—meaning someone who knew the master on the same level. There *was* no such person, as I told him; no secretary, butler, or even a valet, to help him. You were the only person to know. It's a trying position, dearie, but I know you will prove equal to it. After all, there may have to be many changes here, and——"

"Yes; I am quite calm now!" Sheba stood at the open door, looking out with clear eyes as at another world which she must enter. There had been something more on the housekeeper's lips, but a cough had checked it. "I will see him, at once. He has a right to expect it. A week!" She took a step, to pause again. "You—you did not say that Miss Cottrell was there with him?"

"With him? My dear, you have lost touch with everything! As far as I know, she has not left her room a dozen times this week. It is awkward for her—for all of us! There is her bill for nearly ten weeks to be made out and settled, and we are not sure yet whether Mr Loder may have left any special instructions in writing. We

know nothing! As far as that goes, there is no reason at all why Miss Cottrell should be brought a step further into the matter. From now, I should think, it becomes purely a family and private affair."

"In which I should have no part!" Sheba whispered to herself, as she turned to look along the passage.

"You! Miss St John, I hope I am never to hear you say that again. If he chooses to make this his home, of course, you could not remain here very well; but he'll be the first to realise that, or I'm no reader of men's faces! Besides, we'll begin to talk about that when—when the proper moment comes. I only say, let all slip from your mind to-night save the one fact that you can trust Mr Wilfred Spurr with your life, if need be!"

"Thank you—thank you, Mrs Saxon! You have been very, very kind to me. Never let me forget it! I'll go—alone."

Quietly, steadily, Sheba went down the wide staircase and crossed the hall. All had the same, unfamiliar, unreal look down here. All was quiet, with a sort of expectant, waiting stillness. Her sensation was a curiously strange one as she lifted her hand to tap and enter. *He* was master here now!

He was in there. She had heard the notes of the organ in the corner touched once or twice, as by the fingers of a man who knew nothing of music. Now silence again.

She tapped.

CHAPTER XVII

SHE need not have feared !

In truth, every tentative quiver was stilled as she entered the room. She was on the threshold of a new existence at this moment !—that thought left her gloriously calm and prepared. And to face the man, to look once straight into his eyes, was to have fought half her woman's secret battle.

He had been walking thoughtfully to and fro over the soft carpet. For a second or so he did not grasp that the door had opened and the doorway framed Sheba's figure.

It was not the man of her dreams. The travelling ulster and broad felt hat, that had seemed an inseparable part of him, were laid aside. She saw the strong, supple figure of a man with a deeply-bronzed skin, wavy hair brushed back from a thoughtful brow, and resolute determination in every movement ; a man who, despite his trimmed beard, could not be a day older than thirty. A man whom until now, it seemed, she had never met.

In an instant she had taken that much in. She heard the quick stumble. She found his hands gripping hers almost convulsively. The note in his voice told her all that this moment meant for him—as for her.

“You—Miss St John—you!” It came with a break, but steadied at once. “You have come

down to see me? You are really and truly as well as you look? Thank God for that—if I may say so! I have longed for it—longed to talk with someone who might help me to see a light in all this darkness. You understand me? You can say so from your heart?”

“I do,” she whispered. She had not tried to free her hands. “I only hope you will not be disappointed.”

And he sprang away, to draw a chair forward and flick it with his own handkerchief. She knew that he had choked back a sob; she knew that he could not speak again for a moment. When he faced round he was smiling and different.

“Come along! There!” He gently arranged the cushions as she sat back. His hand had to press hers once again in a gratitude that could not be spoken. As he stood back and turned up the crimson shaded pedestal lamp a little his quick eyes noted the dark lines under the velvety watching eyes—the whiteness of the oval face. The blaze of that fire was making itself felt. He sprang once more, and placed one of the balcony doors ajar. And then he stood, as in uncertain awe of the next step. He could not have told why, but the sudden silence of the big room, while Sheba lay back there in the fire’s flickering reflection, sank into him as silence had never done yet. She looked at that moment a soft, elfin little thing too fragile and too wonderful to be disturbed. And it was the moment for which he had waited so long.

“Where are you?” came Sheba’s hushed voice, in the pause. Her eyes had closed and shut out

everything for the minute. She suddenly recollected. With a faint recurrence of that old fear she sat up. "Mr Spurr!"

He came behind, pressed her softly back into the cushions, and leaned there, looking down into her intent face.

"I must give you time," he whispered, smiling. "You see, I had not been used to a household on this scale; I felt completely at a loss. But I have learned to prize a woman's counsel; I could do no other. Till lately, I had the care and advice of the best woman that ever breathed God's air. Whatever character I have, I owe it to her!"

"Mother?" Sheba found herself breathing. His voice had threatened to break again. She might not be able to realise anything so strange just then and there; but, spite of those deep-down doubts, she found herself drawn toward him at that point in a way no words could ever explain. His mother!

"Ay!" he said quietly. "Gone now! I stand quite alone in the world—without even, as far as I know, a friend on this side of the Atlantic. But you are not here to hear all that. Don't try to think—let me do that. It is right that you should know exactly how I stand at this moment. And then—then I have something to ask you."

As he stood back her lips were quivering. No; she did not wish to think!—could not bear the pauses! She looked around, and, woman-like, noticed that a decanter and a pile of sandwiches placed there had not been touched. It appealed to her sharply. She realised for herself.

"And I, too!" she said, with a little reproach-

ful warmth. "I hear that you have refused to eat here, and that you are trying to do without proper rest. Why is that? What do you wish us to think?"

And he looked away, his arms crossed stubbornly, as she turned in the chair.

"Let that pass now, Miss St John. I—I have had no incentive to eat so far. In fact, I meant to tell Mrs Saxon that I should lunch in the town to-day—not for any particular motive, believe me, but because I am so constituted that——" His strong face twitched under her scrutiny. With an effort he swung round, langhing huskily. "I will, then, as you wish it! You should be hostess. That is just as it should be—in your own house!"

"It is not my house, Mr Spurr."

Sheba was upon her feet. The moment must come and must not be put off. She beat back finally her hesitation over that name—stifled the nameless recollection that her lips had called that other man, that impostor, by the same title. She repeated it steadily, challengingly.

"It is not my house. Let us be honest, Mr Spurr—honest now before anything!"

"Not?" He seemed transfixed by something in her drawn-up figure. "Not yours? Then, what does it mean? I understood from the first that you—that you——" A lump seemed to rise in his throat. He set down the plate of sandwiches, and stood stiffly helpless.

Full into his eyes Sheba looked, with a determined bravery that she only realised afterwards. If indeed the true Wilfred Spurr breathed in that

room with her, she would know it now and for all time.

"Don't misunderstand me," she said quietly. "Why did you come here? What brought you all those miles to—to a dying man of whom you had known nothing in life? What did you expect to find here? Tell me that truly, as you will answer Almighty in a Day to come. Tell me!"

The spell of silence, and then his hand had come out. He had not flinched.

"Not in that way—not while you stand in that way. Believe in me first!" he was saying in that deep voice of his. "You will not?—or you will?" And Sheba's fingers reached out and lay passive in that long grip. "I will tell you. I have nothing to gain by keeping anything back—from you, least of all. What is there to keep back? When I entered this house I knew no more than that my uncle's name was Spartan Loder, and I had seen him just once—fully ten years before. A blank wall of difficulty was put around me in the moment of his death. There was no one I could turn to, here or outside. That is simply how I stand to-night. Of you, Miss St John, I had never heard. But you were here—you were 'Miss Sheba' to all; and I asked Mrs Saxon the question outright. Like a good soul she told me all. And now—and now let me speak of that. Let me be honest, as you say. I have heard a hundred whispers—I have shut my ears to them all. I mean to disturb nothing here. I ask you to remain mistress of this house, and to let me be simply a guest, because it is imperative that I should remain on the spot. I ask you to trust me, until all is known!

And then. . . . Miss St John, will you do that—can you? You answered me with a ‘Yes’ that first night, without pausing to think! Why not now?”

Yes, she remembered. It all flashed back as she stood. He had held her in his arms imploringly—begged for that one word from her lips before the night closed in upon the tragedy of his coming. He asked it again now, with an earnestness, a sensitive breathlessness, that brought back the self-same thrill.

“I say it now! I do—I must!” she cried, her hands strained together. “I never meant to take it back!”

And, as if a load had slipped from his mind, he turned, sank heavily into a chair, and let his head bump down upon the table. He looked up with something like a boy’s choke, as her hand came presently trembling upon his shoulder—so softly, so tactfully, so eloquent of the tender sympathy that lifts woman to the angels’ level in man’s hour of darkness!

“What had you to fear? Truth engenders truth,” she whispered gently. “Don’t let it weigh too heavily. Be strong, be brave!” She was unconsciously echoing his own words to her in that first spell of terror. Lower still she stooped. “Out of his death may dawn life! Out of this darkness light! God knows! God’s hand is upon the man who took your place that night!”

Silently she slid the plate of sandwiches close to him, put one to his lips, and then slipped out into the hall. Her brain was whirling perilously after its long suspension; her heart was beating

with a throb that his eyes must have seen. But all that oppressive sense of strain and desolation had oozed away. It only needed the sight of Mrs Saxon, sitting like a faithful watch-dog in the little reception-room opposite, to bring the tears without which a woman cannot live.

"There—there! Let them come! Nestle quite close! Bless you, I'm as comfortable here as in my own room. I kept all the servants away. Well, dearie," she breathed. "He has told you all?"

"All?" Sheba looked away with startled eyes. "I—I hardly know what he *did* say! I wanted to see him eat the sandwiches—our sandwiches! I felt so strange and happy for the minute I slipped away without knowing it!"

"Ah, he knows! Trust me, dearie, for reading a man through at the second glance—always excepting poor Mr Loder, of course. And now—don't be in a hurry! Now the curtain's lifting a wee bit, let me tell you something. Sophie has just come in. She declares that all Felcote knows that there is some mystery, and the place is in a suppressed ferment. Of course, I pooh-poohed it, and refused to understand her. Don't tell him, Miss Sheba, but there's a story going round that he has started digging in all directions for the master's money. He was stooping over the lawn once or twice, I know; and I suppose the servants——"

"It's vile!" trembled Sheba. She could seem to see him sitting there still, his dark head bowed to the table. "He ought to know it—he would rather face them. I know it!"

"We shall see! Well, now, something else—I kept it to tell you. The very first day—the very moment they dared—who should drive up in a landau but the two Barrington girls? To see you, they said; but really, of course, to see *him*, and feel a thrill over the romance of it, and perhaps to—well, I won't judge them. 'Poor, dear Mr Loder!—and that poor dear Sheba!' they were saying, their saucer eyes bulging out for another glimpse of him all the time. My dear, don't you see it all? He's just the mysterious sort of acquisition they'd all be scheming to capture for their garden parties and dances. I acted. I dropped one hint, that should last for all time. I shut the door on them, and just whispered: 'Mr Spurr, I thought as much! Here are two of the superior local princesses—the scornful sisters, I should say—called to sympathise with our young lady; which means, to spy out the land in advance, if you understand me, sir!'"

"Mrs Saxon!" Spires of rose-pink rose in Sheba's pale face for the first time. "You could not—you did not!"

"I did. He knows, and that's everything. They would have gone straight home and planned a ball in his honour—and ignored you on the cards altogether. I told him deliberately: 'The only two things that Mr Loder cared for here in the least were his maze and his Sheba!' And he just nodded in his quiet way. Dearie, I know I ought not to speak so at such a time, but I could have clapped my hands and screamed! They could have stabbed themselves for coming like that—I know it. Of course, the moment poor Mr Loder was gone, and the heir to everything arrived,

they thought the lid was coming off the cauldron at one bound; they were dying to make the first impression. Quite right—they made it; I'll see that it eats well in. And maybe, a little later on—— But, dearie, what must he be thinking in there?"

Sheba took a step, and paused. He might notice a subtle change. The rare carmine flush was burning brilliantly in her cheeks still. She could not—yet she must!

"Could you not come in?" she whispered.

"My dear, certainly not. I know my place, I hope. He wants to confide in you—to pour out his heart to you. You can leave the door ajar, but I shall not even listen. You go to him, dearie, and help him all you can!"

Sheba slowly recrossed the flagged hall. She stole in, and closed the door behind her.

He was waiting. He had drawn up a chair beside hers. She met his eyes, and smiled back—the sandwich plate had been pushed back half empty. If, on his side, he noticed that heightened colour at all, he grasped a mute sign to look quickly away again. He rose, and held her cushions in position. He hung over her with the homage due to the woman who held the highest place in his man's thoughts.

"Thank you—thank you!" she had to say twice, with trembling lips. "Forget me—think of yourself now!"

He drew the portiere curtain across the door of his own accord. He sat down close, and leaned toward the fire. His arms crossed, he began to talk in a low, measured voice which was soon to hold her spellbound. It was impossible—im-

possible!—that he could know of the words that had boomed like a muffled bell-note through her brain all that week, and boomed there now:

“Make haste, Wilfred! . . . Make haste, if—you—want—your—wife!”

CHAPTER XVIII

"MISS ST JOHN, something has told me that we—you and I—are face to face with the greatest crisis in our lives. Speaking for myself, I have stood like a blind man at two cross roads, not knowing which to take; but now your woman's intuition comes in. I shall leave it with you whether I wait any longer to see what happens—or whether I post this letter to Scotland Yard and ask for the cleverest detective that department can supply. If I do post it money must be spent, and the world must know all. The question is—How far am I justified in taking that step? You shall decide."

He waited a moment; but Sheba could not speak. He went on.

"For a week I have done my utmost within certain limits to reach some conclusion. I have failed utterly. The mist upon all has not thinned a jot. And Mr Crewe, the lawyer, could not help me in the least. To be quite frank, I think he preferred to wash his hands of your uncle's affairs—until his bill for advertisements be settled. You understand me? He is not sure of his settlement. So far, then, I have been my own detective. And my one glimmer of a theory will explain to you what I have cared to explain to no one else.

"Miss St John, the man who could fill a rôle as my understudy filled it that night is no ordinary

criminal. Balked once, he was not beaten. In fact, the idea has taken firm hold of me that I am to come face to face—we will put it—with my ‘double.’ Sooner or later that man will return. Because—— Ah, forgive me! I was forgetting—I am a man! Let us put that contingency aside for to-night!”

A quick tremor had run through Sheba’s slight body; unconsciously she had swayed forward to glance around. On an impulse, just as involuntary, Wilfred Spurr leaped up to soothe her with his strong brown hand. He watched till the glaze died out of her eyes.

“Go on! Tell me!” she said faintly.

He went on, in the calm, analytical voice. It had to be told.

“I must go back fully ten years—to our farm, near Toronto. I had heard talk of Uncle Loder as a man with a mystery, and that was all; it died away whenever I came near. One day—one day he arrived as if from out of the ground. He waited two hours to see my father, and vanished again without seeing him—as if afraid of his own first impulse. The years passed; my father had died. One year ago my mother followed him to rest. There was only Uncle Loder left; and him I never expected to see again. Yet there was something in his one brief visit I had never forgotten, and never shall. He took me by the shoulders, and stared closely into my face for a long time. I can tell you his very words: ‘Boy, keep that straight look! Do that, and some day you may hear from Uncle Spartan!’ That was all, but it stuck fast in my memory.”

He put a hand to his eyes for a moment. His steady voice came to her again :

"One day, Miss St John, two or three weeks ago, I was pointed to an advertisement in one of our Colonial papers. It named myself. If I lived, I was wanted. I was to go straight to a solicitor named Crewe, in London, England. If I temporised I should regret it ever afterwards.

"It might have been a colossal hoax. Maybe not one man in fifty would have cared to leave everything and risk the result; but somehow those lines haunted me. I handed over my farm to a man I could trust, and took passage by the first boat. There was barely a fortnight's margin between the realisation and the moment when I walked into Mr Crewe's office. And Mr Crewe sent me on here. He knew no more than myself—knew only that Uncle Loder was said to be sinking. The rest you know. And now, as we must come to that, I must tell you something I have told to no one but the lawyer. That is, my unalterable impression as to what has happened. Why it did not occur to me before—why I did not leap at the truth on the spot—only God knows!"

His voice went down a little, as he turned slowly to look at her. Quite still Sheba sat, but he had anticipated her flash of pallor; intuition told him that in the silence she had heard once more that convulsive jangle of the house bell. He whispered some encouraging word, and the eyes smiled back at him. His hand gripped hers appealingly, reassuringly, again; and this time her fingers held it fast for its warmth and strength.

"Think of this as a tale that is told and past!

. . . On the long express journey—on the vessel again, too—there was a man who called himself Swift. A man a trifle older than myself, maybe, but much of my own height and build. Perhaps you know the drawn-out loneliness of a journey by rail and boat, with a cloud of suspense at the far end of it! I wanted to kill the interminable hours—and Swift seemed to fall into the part naturally. It may have been because I had some hazy idea of having seen him somewhere before; but I talked in an open, friendly way of my queer errand, and of what might hinge in life upon a trifle like a stray advertisement. He, too, was bound for London; and in that great, roaring city of yours we gripped hands and said good-bye—for ever, I naturally thought. You can follow me?”

“Every word—every step!” Sheba’s lips moved.

“Strangely enough, I stumbled against this same man as I burst out from Mr Crewe’s office. I only wanted to pay off my hotel bill for the previous night, and set off at once; no doubt at all, too, I was a little dazed. Once again I said good-bye, and may have shouted out—I cannot be positive—that my quest was now definitely narrowed down to Felcote, in Hampshire. I know he wished me luck, insisted upon taking me back to the hotel by a short cut, went himself for a hansom while I packed, and saw me into it—for Waterloo, as I fully thought. Miss St John, when the cab pulled up, I sprang out to find myself at London Bridge. London Bridge station! And the driver answered point blank that I had given him that direction. I, on my part, knew that the name had never once occurred to me.

"Yes, I can see it more clearly every moment! He drew a crowd together—seemed anxious to delay me in a quarrel. As it was, I reached Waterloo to find the only train gone. A few minutes more, and I should have missed as well an express that would give me an indirect connection with Barrowdene with a loss of only about fifty minutes. I arrived here to learn that some nameless villain had personated and forestalled me by just——

"No; I won't go over that ground! Come back to the present moment!

"I can only think this: Swift, as he called himself, may have been one of the gentlemanly tricksters who haunt the big liners and live by scientific swindling—swindling that only daring cleverness could make successful. He may have gleaned from me more than I know—may even have opened my boxes in the night; and possibly it struck him that the simplest thing in the world would be to represent me here, hear what there was to hear, and reap some reward.

"If so, he made his hurried preparations the moment we reached London. He shadowed me; he had only one word more to hear—'Felcote!' The cabman was bought at a price. That stain on his face, the duplicate ulster and hat (in case his *bona fides* were challenged at any point) did the rest. Even that hypothesis cannot clear up all the fragments of mystery that have met me here; but the facts remain. Yet with such a narrow margin of time before him, what could he have hoped to profit by the fraud—unless he thought to blackmail me subsequently into buying his information? And how incredibly strange

that fate should play into his hands to the very end!—that Uncle Loder should pass from life in the intervening moment!

“One thing more, Miss St John—perhaps the most vital thing of all. I doubt that he hailed from Canada, or that his name was Swift. Just as it happens, I have a card that he unknowingly dropped in my cabin one day from a full card-case. Only this morning I recollected; and there was the card in my breast-pocket, where I had slipped it quite casually. Look? If anything, it complicates the case, and I should see my way well before using it; but—look! It fell from his own card-case. You see the name and address on it—‘Manisty!’”

He drew the pedestal light close, and held out the pasteboard slip for her to read. It fluttered down. Sheba was trying to rise, gasps sounding in her throat. She had tried her woman’s utmost to be strong and helpful; but the intangible horror, the thickening uncertainty behind it all, were too deeply realised. Everything seemed to slip from her for a moment. And then—then when she came to herself, his arm was around her, and his lips set, and his eyes grave and troubled.

“I am cruel,” he was saying, over and over. “I should have known. You have borne more than enough already. No more to-night!”

“No—no!” She made one more great effort, and put back his hands. “You shall! You make me feel a coward—and I am not that! I want to know. You thought—you thought of detectives as your last resource? You wish me to decide for you in that? You hesitated because——”

He stood back, his hands twisting behind him.

"What?" she whispered. "Don't fear to speak. What is it?"

"This! I must know whether Mr Loder kept his will in this house—supposing that he left one. I could ask only you. And, again, if you could give me the barest clue as to what he had to tell before he died. It was something so precious that he would not trust it even to his own lawyer. But you——"

He held his breath, as Sheba's shining eyes looked past him. He had built upon this last hope. And it fell like a house of sand.

"I cannot. In all truth, not one word!" she said slowly. "I have seen no will, nor heard of one. I was trusted, but not with that. And I fully believe that no one will ever know what he meant to tell you, except——"

"Swift!" He went striding to and fro, his throat working. "The blank wall—the blank wall again! It is maddening—maddening!" He strode back, and stood quite close to her. His voice had suddenly changed. "One thing more, Miss St John, before we part! There is one question of mine you *can* answer, and you will, strange as it shall sound. Last Thursday—think back—were you—could you by any human possibility have been in the maze between ten o'clock and midday? Don't look at me; just think—I want to know—I mean to know!"

"In the maze?" Sheba's voice seemed to die out of her. She repeated it to herself. Her eyes wandered past him, with a troubled, half-waking expression. Was she struggling to recall some-

thing? She touched his arm ever so softly. "Why—why did you ask me that? oh, why?"

No answer. His lips parted twice, but no word passed. He waited. He saw Sheba's hand waver up to her forehead. She spoke, in a hushed, absent way, as if going mentally step by step over some old ground half forgotten.

"How strange! The maze—yes, the maze! Not Thursday—no, it seemed to be at night, only a day or two ago. I seemed to be walking from my room in a dream, and yet to know all that happened—without wondering, till this moment. Another figure moved along the passage ahead of me, and down the back staircase—I had to follow it. We left the house by a door I had never used before: the old servants' entrance, that had been kept fastened for years. The shrubbery ends there. Yes—yes; it was just light enough to see. It was a woman's figure, with the face wrapped in a shawl. I followed her straight into the maze quite calmly, and along the paths. When she stopped I stopped. It seemed—it seemed as if she had a light, and was looking for something there. Then I lost her. I cannot remember finding my way out and back into the house. Of a sudden I was standing in my own room. All was as quiet as ever, and Mrs Saxon lay fast asleep still on the bed opposite mine. I looked at the clock. I looked at the dust on my felt shoes—the red dust of the cinder path. I lay down again—I could not believe that I had ever moved. No; it was a dream—must have been! Why should I think of the maze—much less of entering it in that way? And yet—and yet it seems so real again now——"

In the silence Spurr cleared something huskily from his throat. He sat her gently back, and tried to laugh.

"Don't worry—I'm not going to! We shall never come at the truth in that way. I was not thinking of that at all; I meant, in the broad daylight, with the sun shining. I can't tell you now what made me——"

It broke off. As he straightened up, his hand, resting upon her shoulder, tightened convulsively. She heard him draw in a long, whistling breath as of desperation—saw his figure stiffen. He looked down at his hands for a moment critically, and seemed to be trying to hum a tune. Then he stooped slowly until his eyes were on a level with hers.

"Don't start or move. Keep perfectly still," he said, in an altered voice—a voice of quiet command.

"What is it? What have you seen?" came the quick breath.

"It's all right. Don't move! Miss St John, that French window over there has been pushed open several inches by—by someone who is watching us now from the balcony. For all I know, all that I told you may have been overheard. No, I am not mistaken—someone is standing there now. You're not to tremble—not to look. I'll know!"

No need to warn her. Sheba could not stir a limb—could only watch in a sort of numbed fascination as, still humming aloud, still stooping close, he gradually turned his head so that he could stare into the great mirror above the fireplace. It could have been thought that he was whispering eager, passionate words. His keen eyes were straining

to pierce and dissect every detail of the shadow picture reflected in that glass. Little puffs of hot breath went past her cheek at intervals.

"There—there! . . . God! if those doors only opened outwards! The creeper has moved again—on the right-hand side—no, the left! There were fingers—I can almost see a face. Is it—could it be? . . . Be brave, now! If you'll only obey me a moment more something may happen that——"

Too late. With a low cry, half sob and half hysterical laugh, Sheba caught at his arm, swayed up, and faced the glass doors behind her chair. She must—she must—if life itself were the forfeit!

She saw nothing. The film of fear blurred her eyes; she turned them back quickly, to realise again the deep, baffled trouble in his own. And then——

A loathing of the rambling old mansion, that once she had loved for its very quaintness and isolation, had been slowly taking possession of her for days past. It materialised in this instant with the sensation of a galvanic shock. Wilfred Spurr seemed to loom in that wild moment like a guardian angel—his strong figure, his presence here, were keeping the terror at bay. She did not know it, but she had thrown both arms about him, as he made to leap away.

"No—no! Don't leave me! I cannot bear it—I cannot stay here!"

"Miss St John!" He freed himself—held her away with more firmness than he realised just then. "You must!" he whispered hotly. "Be your own true self! Quick, it has gone—let me

go! For the peace of this house, let me know, now or never. Mrs Saxon—Mrs Saxon!”

He sprang to the door, flung it wide, ripping the portiere curtain, and then had bounded back for the double glass doors. They crashed open. He was out—a dangerous man at that moment, as he dashed aside the swaying tendrils and stood ready to leap and throttle anything that moved.

Nothing—no one! Sick at heart, every muscle aching for action, he strode both ways along the balcony. Nothing! He vaulted the rail, ran a few yards, and stared in all directions. But no human eyes could have hoped to pierce the vague masses of shadow thrown by the house and trees. And then, with a little breath-hiss, he recollected that other rooms opened on to that balcony.

Ahead lay the great lawn, a clear stretch of silver under the harvest moonlight. To the right were the grounds and the far plantation belt; to the left, the gravel sweep and drive. Nothing offered the barest clue. Three seconds of time had obliterated it. The simplest, the wisest thing to go back and declare himself mistaken; yet he was more positive than he would ever like Sheba St John to know. The faintest breeze might have set creeper filaments stirring fantastically and swung the door inwards, but he was prepared to affirm solemnly that he had picked out the nebulous lines of a human face. Whose? The face that had stared, ghostlike, at him through a privet hedge in the maze?

Perhaps ten minutes had ticked by when he quietly re-entered and fastened back the glass doors. Where was Sheba? He looked carefully

out, his mind palpitating with uneasiness on another score now. At the head of the staircase there, lamp in hand, Mrs Saxon stood waiting—waiting bravely as for anything that might happen. He went calmly up to her level.

“Nothing! Don’t be alarmed.”

“Nothing? You expect us to believe that, sir? Nothing? You would never have called in that voice. And Miss Sheba——”

“Hush! Gone to her room, has she? I’m glad. Stay with her, Mrs Saxon; don’t leave her yet. Tell her—tell her I have investigated thoroughly, and am satisfied it was purely my own illusion!”

“Tell her a lie, for our own sake. Very well, sir!”

She had seen him force a smile, and she had seen something else—little clusters of sweat-beads on his dark forehead.

He wiped them away. His voice sank in confidence.

“You—er—did not see anyone come in just now—within the last few minutes?” he asked. “I don’t mean by the hall door.”

“Mr Spurr, don’t! No one is out, that I am aware. It has gone ten o’clock. You forget!”

“Think again! Could anyone have come in by another door, just after I shouted your name?” And the lamp shook in her grasp.

“Not to my knowledge! I caught hold of Miss Sheba, and led her straight upstairs. No; the servants keep to the other side after supper, and come to me for passes after ten o’clock. I tried all those doors and windows myself at dusk—always do! There is only the door at the foot

of the rear staircase, and that has been locked for years and years. You surely cannot mean——”

“No, no! Don’t listen to me at all!” He squared his shoulders—laughed quietly at the pale suspicion in her face. For once Mrs Saxon felt unable to read a man “at a glance.” “It must be your relaxing Felcote air; my nerves have gone limp here. I must see Doctor Lancing on my own account!”

“You’ll never do that, sir. That I do happen to know.”

“Ah! Well, never mind that. Oblige me, Mrs Saxon, by going to bed. You are tired out with one strain and another. If *you* break down everything will go wrong! Me? Oh, I’m preferring the couch again to-night—if you’ll let me! It’s nothing; away home, as I told you, I have often slept on the bare ground for choice!”

“Mr Spurr, stuff and nonsense—pardon me!” Her voice broke warmly. “I’m sure your room is as comfortable as can be!”

“*Too* comfortable — that’s just the secret!” Laughingly he seized her hand, and wrung it as he bent to whisper: “I might not wake if I wished to. You don’t understand? There’s no necessity. Seriously, I want to think for all of us. I must! If nothing transpires within the next forty-eight hours you will be finding accommodation for a gentleman from Scotland Yard! There, good-night—God bless us all! Say it to Miss St John for me—tell her a golden sun always shines behind the cloud that looks blackest!”

Whistling to himself almost cheerfully, he went on to his own room. He was in there but a

moment. Still whistling, back down into the drawing-room he went—the room that looked so deserted and different now. Mrs Saxon was not to know how abruptly his throat music ceased as he closed the door, and took out something small and polished from his breast pocket.

It was the revolver. He had bought it in Toronto. It had lain under his pillow every night since. Its six chambers were still loaded, and might remain so indefinitely. But he had waited these seven days in the fixed, vague belief that a moment would come—and the moment must not find him wanting!

CHAPTER XIX

BARROWDENE furnaces had died down to a mere suggestion of crimson against the blue-black sky. Felcote lay as still and dark as a deserted town. The sluggish moan of the sea could just be heard, answered by intangible rustlings from the deep Hampshire pine woods.

Two o'clock. The soft-toned chime of the Manor House hall clock had just spoken it. It was the vast hush before the dawn—the hour when sleep has its most deadening influence. What voices come to whisper to the wakeful man in that hour!

In the drawing-room that couch had not been drawn from its place to-night. Wilfred Spurr sat there by the sinking fire still. He had laid aside his pipe, and was lost in deepest thought. Beside him still was the low, cushioned chair he had placed for Sheba. Days ago it seemed since she had sat there!—and yet, did he close his eyes, he could seem to see hers shining out still. He was curiously calm, and just as curiously unsettled, to-night. That talk with Sheba, dramatically abrupt as its ending had been, had set every nerve palpitating as with fresh life and determination.

Step by step, in this silence, he had gone doggedly back from the start at Toronto to the stunning moment when he first saw Sheba St

John's oval and deathly face, and realised Mrs Saxon's awed whisper :

"You have been, sir! You have been and gone!"

"Now," Spurr said to himself steadily for the fiftieth time, just as he had said it to Mr Crewe, "that man, whoever he was, wanted that particular room. *Why?* He had been told something which concerned that room. *What?*"

And in the pause he could recall the stiff old lawyer's reply :

"Quite so! That is what you have to discover. Sooner or later—sooner, you may be sure—he will come back here to carry out his defeated object. Be on your guard—watch and wait—and your problem will answer itself. Sorry I cannot assist you in person—the police ought to do that. At the first sign of a will—of any break in the clouds—send for me!"

On a recurring impulse, too strong, too compelling, to be denied, Spurr rose, moved out into the hall, lit a taper there, and tiptoed along towards the library. It seemed the only thing to do, whenever his thoughts stopped dead at that point.

The key was in the lock. He stooped to examine it, and then went quietly in. Once again he felt along the dark-panelled walls, tapping for possible recesses. For the third time he unlocked and ransacked that centre desk carefully. Again he went down for that tedious inspection of the floor boards. The tall timepiece on the left ticked with ironical steadiness at him, as he stood up for one last glance around. He was not beaten.

He was reluctantly trying to believe that this part of his theory was wrong — unaccountably wrong.

The first feeling of drowsiness had stolen over him. He would go up to his room, and to bed. To-morrow, his letter to Scotland Yard should be posted without fail.

Back in the drawing-room, he turned out the pedestal lamp. The revolver—where was it? He must have placed it down somewhere in the library; the sight of it would send a fresh quiver through the household. He re-lit the taper and went patiently back.

Yes, it was there. Now it was slipped in his breast-pocket. And now——

What was that? *That?*

Instinctively he slid his hand up the taper, and extinguished it. Darkness swallowed up everything; but it was the man's hearing alone that bore the strain in that moment. Heavens—heavens—yes! There—and there again. Above the tick-tack of the tall clock he heard it: the stealthy crunch upon the gravel path out there.

He closed the door behind him—stood with his back to the wall farthest from the windows. They were shuttered now, but he could see the half-light beyond through small loopholes. The taper fell; drew in one long breath, and crouched forward he in the attitude of a man starting for a sprint race. Was it to be?—was it to happen to-night? Some words—almost a dry, straining prayer—rose in his throat. And then all else sank out of his mind. He knew only that someone or something had climbed the balcony railing at that point, and that

fingers were fumbling and tugging carefully at the glass doors.

A pause; a pause never to be described or forgotten. Then it commenced—the creaking, grinding, nibbling sound, as if a legion of rats had begun to burrow in the panelled recesses somewhere. Click! The slight window-fastenings, mere corroded strips of brass, had given way. Again the gnawing, straining sound, and then, with a sudden dry crack like a cough, the old shutters had parted and swung slowly inward. A wave of summer air, warm as new milk, fanned in.

Would he ever lose the memory of that moment's sensation?—the passion, longing, awe and fascination of a lifetime seemingly compressed into one silent moment?

A man stood there, framed as in a ghostly picture, distinct against the background of illuminated lawn. For a few seconds he made no movement, as if gauging the risks that might breathe in this silence. Then, craning forward, he peered around the room. Just a vague glimpse the staring watcher had of a face, and then the figure had felt its way inside.

Now—now for the secret! And then—then the final struggle for possession of that secret!

A slight, careful crackle. Just in time Spurr realised and slid down to his knees on the bear-rug there. Simultaneously a match flared up; then another. For a moment the watcher could make nothing of it. The centre desk blotted out his view; he might only judge that the other man was gazing round to take bearings of the apartment, in which he had never set foot until now.

The second match died out. Another maddening pause, and then a fumbling sound. Stare round the desk as he might, Spurr could swear to nothing. But his hand had crept toward that breast-pocket; whatever came of it, he could not endure the uncertainty much longer.

The groping went on. The searcher had begun to mutter passionately under his breath—it might be in impotent curses, or in the ecstasies of success. And then, of a sudden, as the partial stillness came again, something dawned upon Wilfred Spurr's brain.

That clock had stopped.

His hand had been clutching a box of wax vestas lying in his pocket. He bounded to his feet, and drew one down the strip of rough metal. It flared out. His arm shook. He had the feeling of being alone in the cage of some loathsome, unnamed beast. He had wanted to see—to come face to face just once with the man who had forestalled him at the critical hour of his life. And he was to have his deepest desire.

Full across that man's face the sickly light fell. He had given one convulsive shudder aside, and then remained as though paralysed. Into the dark face, unspeakably evil, unspeakably haggard, as with the hunger of sleepless days and nights, with the remnants of the olive stain still streaked upon it, Spurr gazed. There was the dishevelled broad felt hat—the original counterpart of his own; there hung the spurious fur-trimmed travelling ulster—even that had not been discarded. Swift—or Manisty—in the living flesh! His “double,” at last!

Just that clear sight of a face that burned itself upon his memory for ever—just long enough to see the lips drawing back from the teeth in a grin of fear and hate. Then the vesta had given out. No time to feel for the revolver and take a blind aim in the dark. He gave it no thought. He had sprung, both rigid arms flung out to grip that lying throat and choke the truth—Spartan Loder's last words—from it.

Not yet!—not in that way! His rush missed by a hair's breadth, as the man gave that convulsive twist again. A moan, a shower of blows, another twist, and they were face to face once more.

"Keep off!—or take this!" came the husky, whistling breath.

A knife—maybe the very weapon that had forced window and shutters—had swung up. Spurr shrank; the blade tip had slashed down within an inch of his face. Again he gave way and stumbled back, as the other drove full at his chest with that murderous thing. It was a feint on his part—and another met it. Something quicker than himself, his "double," suddenly swerved and leaped for the balcony, stopped dead, and launched out a leg behind with the back-twist used by the practised criminal. The heavy heel struck Spurr full in the body, and sent him reeling back with a sharp gasp of pain. Forward he stumbled again, the revolver shakily pointed; but the great chance of that night seemed to have slipped him. It was not a page out of a romance: it was a morsel of ironic reality. He had pitted himself against a man of superior cunning—the

man with most at stake. Before it seemed possible, his fellow-voyager had dropped from the railing and was tearing along the gravel walk below.

Stunned by the swift daring of it, Spurr stood, noises booming in his brain. He wanted to shout, and could not. And yet, to escape, so easily, at this crucial moment—no! He set his teeth, dashed along the balcony, and was off in white-hot pursuit.

And now—now began a life-and-death race. Spurr knew it. So surely as he was determined upon capture, as surely the hunted man never meant to allow one life to stand between himself and escape.

Under purely nominal conditions, Wilfred Spurr might have covered three yards to the other's two; but fear lends its wings—and a million of money still swung in the scales. There seemed to be no thought of doubling or risking another hand-to-hand struggle. Straight on through lace-like patches of moonlight, through the obscure shadows, they panted; and the man ahead, the travelling cloak outspread like a fan, was keeping his precious lead. Along the gravel drive and past the stables, a plunge through the evergreen shrubbery, away at a sharp angle across the park-land, along the still Felcote road for some distance—and then, as by sudden inspiration, that flying shape ahead had swerved down the shingle track that led to the sea. To the sea!

Jaws gripped hard in determination, Spurr followed, barely realising. He could hear a dull booming ahead, could feel his shoes sinking into loose, treacherous soil, but the precise significance of it escaped him for the moment. He had never

been this way before. He simply knew that he had it in him to pound along at a rate which, sooner or later, must exhaust the other man.

And then—suddenly, that careering shape ahead was blotted out of sight. A pit?—a trap? Startled, uncertain, he drew up sharply to grasp the position; then spurted desperately on again. Now he could see. The loose track zigzagged down through a gap or cutting in the solid cliff wall, and there abruptly ended. He raced through—to draw up quivering and staring. It was the bay; the lonely, rock-strewn cove where, they said, old Spartan Loder had occasionally walked after dark with that ghost of his past. And he seemed to be the one living thing there.

It seemed more or less than human. He could not move—there was no call to move. He had a full view of the horseshoe-shaped sand-spit; and he held guard at the only way out. The weird beauty of the scene, even at such a chaotic moment, held him in thrall.

There, stretching away as to eternity, tumbled and heaved the sea. Countless silver paths of moonlight danced, died away, and shimmered again on the ebony-like swells. The dull boom of its thudding waves sounded like far-off guns at work in war time. To his right and left stretched the velvet carpet of white sand, dotted with fantastic piles of green stone. And behind him was the intense silence of the land, as if it held its breath in fear of the oncoming waters.

Beaten! Beaten!

He took a slow, incredulous step forward. The sand deadened all sound, and those towering cliffs

on either side threw huge black shadows, and were honeycombed themselves with cavernous hollows eaten by the suction of the winter tides. Wolfish, blazing eyes might be watching him from one of those recesses as he stood.

Beaten! Heavens, yes!

No! He had taken another unconscious stride forward.

All the stagnating blood in him rushed to the surface again, with a sensation half horror and half joy. As in a spasm of fear, the cloaked figure darted out from one of those hollows and made toward him. It was the rush of death—Spurr knew it. Without a thought as to the consequences, forgetting man's law—God's Law—he snatched out the revolver, pointed it, and fired.

Bang! The sound echoed like a thunder-blast around the cove. He had missed—but that was all. Before he knew that his finger had pulled the trigger the other man had swerved once more and was making for the water's edge. It was reached. Spurr drew up; the pistol fell from his hand; he watched in a numbness of awe. Sheer into the water the flying figure had dashed, and was shoulder deep, striking out wildly. A swell rolled in and drove him back. It returned, and sucked him out again. Feebly, more feebly, his head thrown back, he fought to get out of reach. A heavier swell caught him—tossed him round—swirled him out and left him struggling in a trough. Now his arms scarcely moved. He was gone! . . . A hand shot up, clutching at the moonlight ladders on the surface. His face reappeared a second time—his body had been carried through the black

belly of another breaker. One gurgling, awful cry—the last cry of a man fighting madly to keep his bare lips clear of the salt lava that sucked him down—screamed across the sand-spit.

“Save me! Curse you, save me!”

Save him! Spurr sprang to realisation with a shudder, and stumbled forward. A white-maned roller was just curving for the soft fall. He shot through it, and next moment was hurling himself with all the strength he possessed through the water beyond. He could see nothing. Down—down twice—into the green valleys he plunged, feeling in all directions; and then suddenly his hands clutched the inert thing, as it swayed slowly up to the surface once more. At last—at last!

Was it too late? For a moment he could not tell. He was treading water for a respite to get back breath and sense. Nothing as yet seemed real; all had happened so swiftly. Then he knew that a gush of salt water had poured from the man's lips and nostrils; arms felt around him and clung on feebly. Swift—or Manisty—had come back to a second lease of life.

A surge of exaltation gave Spurr new strength and vast pity in that moment. All but the bare fact of life—life purchased by himself—was blotted out. He swung the weed from the clinging man's eyes, kept himself afloat with hands and feet, and waited. That first feeling of fear went through him as he stared down into the sick, sinister face upturned, and realised that the arms were tightening about his neck, and the legs about his body. He had given one glance back to the sand-spit, and knew that the tide must be running out. The

horseshoe cove was farther to the right than it should have been.

"Keep still!" he said. "Keep still, and you're safe. You hear? If not——"

"Yes—yes!" came the other's rattling gasp. In his eyes was still the congealed terror that subjugated every other human consideration. He had looked into those of Death—Death crouching at the base of those green, swirling valleys where the blind snakes crawled upon ooze. "Save me! You shall know all—for my life!"

"I shall," Spurr said, in a deep, resolute voice. A great, vague calm had come to him. He would not admit yet that he could forge no way back with those tentacles tightening the breath out of him. Then suddenly he threw back his head pantingly. "You'd strangle me—sink me! Take away your arms, man, and let me—let me. . . ."

It did not finish. That calmness had been one of faintness. He was going down. He heard Swift give a gurgling scream as a roller slid over them. As he struggled upright again, out of the silence a thunder of voices seemed shouting to Spurr to deal a blow at the upturned face and save himself alone. He would not hear. With a heaving groan he struck slowly out for the sand-spit, their intertwined bodies alternately swayed under the surface. A few more strokes, the bubbles breaking in his suffocated throat, and then he found his hand feeling up for the other's neck.

"Let go!" he muttered. "For God's sake, let go! One—must—die. . . ."

There was no response. The sick eyes stared up

at him in mute, awful meaning. They said that, if one must drown, both should drown.

A great passion and a great agony surged together in Spurr. He must!—he must do it! And then he thought of Sheba. She seemed to be standing there on the sand-spit, seeing all, watching this supreme test of his manhood. At that, moment the illusion seemed vividly real. Murder in the open moonlight, before her watching eyes—no!

He fought on, with arms and feet that seemed weighted with iron. The long swells reared above his half-blind eyes, and dashed down into them, as he paused and lay back, that living death uppermost upon him. He tried to speak again, but no voice was left to him. In a dazed state he struck out yet again. And at last, when the cold lethargy of utter collapse was creeping over him, he felt his groping hands trail upon slime and sand, and knew that, in some miraculous way, he had reached land. Feebly, half unconsciously, he crawled on hands and knees up the slope, till the sand felt warm and dry. On yet a little farther—till he toppled forward. And then, and only then, the horrible tentacles relaxed. The shrieking of devils ceased.

He could not speak, could not move, for a time. He lay with his lips close against that other man's face; he knew nothing till Swift's hand came up and beat away the contact. Through the dulled corridors of his brain there was going a sound as of bells pealing and voices singing. His eyes had closed to everything. He knew by some instinct that the other man was not beside him now, that the fruits of his great effort had been snatched

from him; but he could not stretch out a hand to prevent it—could not turn to see what was happening.

Perhaps he had swooned. He would never rightly know in this life. When, presently, he found himself upon his feet, he was staggering to and fro like a drunken man. He was no more sure that it had all taken place than a man just waking from a nightmare. Sharp pains were going through his head; the suffocating grip of those arms seemed still about his neck; all was a blood-red blur.

Swift was gone: but he had forgotten Swift. The glint of the pistol, lying where it had fallen caught his eyes as he stumbled heavily toward the gap. He stooped for it, without recalling just how it came to be there. Then he staggered mechanically on, guided solely by the drunkard's instinct. He *was* drunk. Drunk with excitement and the stupefaction of that struggle to reach land.

There was the house. How he had come at it he could not tell. He reeled up the balcony. The library glass doors stood flung back just as he had left them. He felt his way through, along the passage, fumbled for his wax vestas, found them dry in their metal case, and lit the pedestal lamp. But how it was all accomplished he could not afterwards have told. Somewhere deep in his mind the instincts were at work, because he strove to act stealthily, and without noise. He must have known vaguely that the sodden clothes clinging upon him constituted a physical danger, because he moved unsteadily at once across to the side-board. Brandy was there; he drank down a gulp as if it had been water. The curious effect was, to

partially sober him. He could look round and wonder whether he had ever really left that chair by the dying fire. One more gulp and he was almost himself again. He remembered. The tremendous significance of that realisation did the rest.

For a time, insanity had seemed to threaten him. The reaction had set in. He was steady and collected enough now. One thing—one great thing: part of the mystery was torn away! He could tell Sheba that Swift—or Manisty—his fellow-traveller, was the man who had played the diabolical rôle on that never-forgotten night.

That clock!—that clock, that had suddenly stopped.

He removed his soaked shoes, and tiptoed out. He found the taper, lit it, and looked. He was almost past feeling a new sensation; it seemed only a bare, natural fact that the door of the tall timepiece stood half-open. The pendulum hung mute and still. Quite calmly he peered into the dusty recess behind it. What was it?—a hole revealed by a sliding panel? He thrust in his arm.

There was nothing. Nothing! The exquisite irony of it made him smile to himself. The aperture in the solid wall was quite empty. The thief, then, had come back with a vengeance. In the pockets of the thing that he had plucked out of those green depths had lain the spoil; and he had let it slip from him. The net result of that night's work was, that a finger pointed mockingly to the hiding-place chosen by Spartan Loder.

There was a doggedness, a patience, in Spartan Loder's nephew which enabled him to rise the

stronger after a blow that had floored him. He simply slid back the panel, and went out to look at the hall clock. He had no intention of raising an alarm—gave never a thought to it; no good could come of that, where only the nerves of sensitive women were concerned. He had something very different in his mind.

Deliberately he put on the hands of the tall timepiece and set the pendulum swinging. Then he turned his attention to the forced shutters. Five minutes' quiet work had made them secure again, with no visible damage done. The knife had prised up a bar that connected the two sections—that was all. He made mental note of the fact that, given a crude implement and a little daring, it was as easy to gain entrance to the old Manor House by night as by day.

He was back in the drawing-room. He had recollected one thing more—one thing which, after all, crowned the rush of events with a quiet triumph on his own side. Swift had beaten him; but, quite unknown to Swift, he possessed that address card. In all probability it was the clue by which, sooner or later, the clever scoundrel could be tracked.

The pasteboard slip! He walked straight to the table. He knew just where the card had lain, as he whispered to Sheba not to move in her chair. And—it was not there!

He stood. He would not feel in his pockets—made no attempt to look around the room. There was no need. His brain was in full working order now. The card had been lying there as he shouted Mrs Saxon's name and took that leap out to the balcony. It had been taken—and never by Sheba

St John. It had disappeared in that brief interval while he stood whispering with Mrs Saxon on the staircase. And, strain his faculties as he might, he could recall no more than "Manisty" and the words "Brixton, London." Not until yesterday had he once glanced at the card since slipping it into his pocket on board the boat.

He passed a hand across his forehead once. Then he turned out the lamp, and went steadily up to his room. In the same quiet way he stripped, rubbed himself thoroughly down with a rough towel, and drew on an entire change of clothing. The loss of a night's rest was nothing—nothing to a man who had lived the hard, simple life he had lived away at Toronto. His face bathed, his hair brushed, he drew up the blind.

Grey and gold dawn stole in with the tentative twitter of birds and the fresh scent of opening flowers. He had nearly an hour to wait yet. For that length of time he sat staring into space that seemed to frame the sweet, sad, imploring face of a woman—a woman whose future happiness trembled in the invisible scales—a woman named Sheba!

Seven o'clock was striking as Wilfred Spurr strode into Felcote. Early as it was, he had attracted many stares; but his set face, from which the tan was fading a little, turned neither to right nor left. Without hesitation he walked up the police station steps, and put a simple question, ignoring the flutter caused by his presence at such an hour.

"To see the inspector? Yes, sir!" The fore-

most of the three constables on duty bowed breathlessly. "You shall, sir, if you'll wait in his room for five minutes. He lives only three houses down. Ay, thank you, sir—we don't meet many gentlemen!"

He paced the room for ten minutes, perhaps, before the inspector bustled in. He was a cheerful, purple-faced man with a husky voice, and his very first words reminded the listener of a certain opinion delivered by Mrs Saxon. He struck an attitude at the doorway, half in sight of a knot of people peering up from the street. It was incumbent upon him to strike also some impressive note at the outset. One stare, and the note was struck.

"You're Mr Wilfred Spurr!"

"Indeed?" was the steady answer. "And how did you know that?"

"Ah!" The inspector chuckled huskily, as after a revelation of acumen. "My business to know, sir! Come to that, I have seen you two or three times in the town this week, generally after dusk."

"Indeed?" he said again. It was but his second visit to Felcote, and he had never seen this man before. He was vaguely impressed, spite of himself. "Who says so, may I ask?"

"I say so, sir, with your permission. I believe you made two or three purchases of—er—eatables."

Spurr looked him up and down. And then—then he thought of something. Felcote knew nothing of a "double." It was Swift who had ventured into Felcote after dusk—who had risked coming face to face with his duplicate. He drew

a long breath, and looked around. The knot of people outside had thickened. He saw that there was a rear entrance to the building.

"Could we use that way out?" he asked abruptly. And the inspector scented business.

"Certainly, sir! I beg your pardon. If I'd known it was confidential——"

"It is. That is why I called. I'll trouble you to walk back with me a little way."

CHAPTER XX

THE new day, Thursday, had made good progress—and grown remarkably warm, as the inspector had found occasion to say more than once—before Spartan Loder's nephew strode back to the house to gulp down a late breakfast.

Mrs Saxon watched him anxiously. He looked thinner ; and there was the fact that he had locked his bedroom door before going out. But he vouchsafed no information. The one gleam of light came into his eyes when she ventured to say that Miss Sheba seemed to have passed a fairly good night.

He went upstairs. She heard the key of his room turn, and turn again.

He was spreading out the wet clothes by his window to dry. Then he threw himself down on the bed, and allowed his strained eyes to close. Only a few minutes seemed to pass, but noon had been notched when he grasped that someone was drumming at the door. He sprang up. Sophie, the maid, went guiltily back from the crevice.

"This note for you, sir—just come!"

It had been hastily pencilled, was marked "Strictly Private," and ran as follows:—

"DEAR SIR,—I have given the boy sixpence to run with this report, thinking it best not to show near the house in person. He is not likely to

chatter, as I first satisfied myself that he has played truant from school.

"Dear Sir,—Up to the moment of writing I can get no trace whatever of a man answering in any way to your description. Since leaving you I have made further careful search of every likely spot in the vicinity of the cove. Excuse me for believing that no such man is concealed there. By far the simplest course would be to make inquiries at the local casual wards to ascertain whether a tramp of that description is known; but perhaps you would object to the publicity. I am taking upon myself, however, to send two trustworthy men to scour the lanes and fields in the radius. If anything comes of this I will communicate with you instantly.

"*P.S.*—Dear Sir,—Since writing the above it occurs to me that the man is no tramp. If, as you say, he went off wearing a cloak and hat of your own, abstracted from the Manor House at the time of his felonious attempt, it seems advisable to assume that he had discarded portions of his own clothing—possibly somewhere in the grounds. With your permission I will make a personal search there at the first opportunity. In the meantime rely upon my strict discretion.

"INSPECTOR TRANSOME."

Spite of a dull disappointment Wilfred Spurr bit his lip upon a smile as he tore the note into fragments. His first impulse was to reply in three sharp words—"Let matter drop." But he decided to wait.

Gradually the day wore on toward its close.

He looked at his watch and scanned a bend of the Felcote road at intervals, but each hour drew a blank. Everything seemed to be in a state of suspension. Only once during the long day had he seen and spoken with Sheba St John, and then it was almost a fugitive glimpse and word.

He had been writing in his room. As he left it he passed some workmen apparently busy plastering up a perished wall in the branch corridor, and paused to watch proceedings. One of the workmen spoke :

"Did think of asking, sir, whether there was any objection to our smoking on the job. It looks a longer one than it did at first."

"Smoke, by all means, if you want! At least, perhaps I ought to tell you to ask Miss St John about that."

He had turned away. There was a soft rustle of drapery, and he came face to face with Sheba herself.

"You!" He breathed it involuntarily. Yesterday seemed so long ago at that moment. She was pale still, but surprisingly calm; and that listening look had died out of her eyes. Hardly knowing, he reached out both hands, and hers lay tightly gripped between them for an instant. "I mean, you were able to sleep?" he whispered on quickly. "I feel as if I had——"

"Don't speak of it!" She could smile up, to reassure him. "It is all forgotten. I have come down to take my place again—as you wished!"

"God bless you!"

That was all. The workmen had ceased work, and were waiting to broach the further and more delicate question of tobacco.

And now it was close upon six o'clock, and he had practically relinquished even that forlorn hope of hearing that his elusive "double" had been brought to bay in some quiet corner, and would confess all he knew as the alternative to arrest. If that could have happened—how much it might have meant! Compounding a felony, Inspector Transome might label it; but the inspector was open to conviction. With an offer of freedom dangling before him Swift—or Manisty—might have made a clean breast of all that had been done in the dark, and no one need be the wiser. In that case——

"Note for you, sir!" It was Sophie again, with her inevitable swift blush. "The same boy brought it, and ran away without waiting!"

He took it eagerly. From Inspector Transome—yes! His pulse quickened as he scanned the few hastily-pencilled words:

"DEAR SIR,—Just as soon as convenient, must see you for five minutes—near the lodge gates. To stop the talk, shall leave Felcote in plain clothes and cut through the grounds."

He went out at once—and glanced around him in bewilderment. Darkness already? Twenty minutes ago, at most, the sky had been one rich flame of orange and scarlet; now he was startled to find it blotted out by a curling, wintry-looking vapour. As he went uncertainly down the drive the vapour appeared to thicken and become a fog, tangible and clammy. Fantastic patches of it fled across the open park on his right like an army of

misty shapes suddenly summoned. It seemed a phenomenon.

The roadway at the end was still fairly clear, however, and Transome stood there, with the air of a man who had paused by mere accident to count the leaves on a certain tree. Transome was fully in his element.

"That you, sir? Awkward, this, sir!" he whispered, huskily confidential. "Thought we should have something before long; I said so, this morning, you remember. It's going to be nasty while it lasts. If you had left it till this evening, sir, we shouldn't have got out of the cove in twenty-four hours. Would you believe me, sir——"

"Yes, yes! What is the news?" Spurr put in quietly. The inspector's manner had told him to expect some.

"Ah, to be sure, sir! Well, it's not much, and yet it's a great deal." He cleared his dry throat after the paradox. "I think I've done all that a man could do, and I'm offering ten to one in sovereigns—only with myself, mind, sir!—that I could find part of his clothing in these very grounds. At the present moment, sir, while you and I are standing calmly here, your man is walking about London streets, one hundred odd miles away."

"London!"

It sounded as hopeless, as full of finality, as if the inspector had mentioned Hades. London! His mind had been vaguely following that fugitive shape in imagination from cavern to cavern along the cliff wall.

"That's the word, sir. At least, 'London' was on the ticket he took, and which he paid for.

He's not likely to get out half-way and come back on foot. My solemn advice is, Mr Spurr, if you really want to get back the valuable papers he took away in your cloak, to let me wire a full description at once, before the day goes. Once in London streets a man's apt to reckon himself swallowed up; but what's London, after all? Put me in a London street, with some idea of——"

"Do let me think!" Spurr said sharply. "How did you find this out?"

"Ah, there you are, sir! It's my position. As he wasn't where you expected, I turned to what *I* thought the likeliest place—the railway station. And there I found him—at least, the strongest recollection of him. Almost the same thing, you'll admit!"

"And why couldn't you have suggested that at first?"

"Well, it was a queer affair, to begin with, sir. You must have some straw before you can begin making your bricks, as they say. After my first note to you I sat down and figured it all over afresh, and then it dawned. That was no tramp, Mr Spurr! Tramps don't touch burglary. Shirking work, they're born cowards, and like daylight as much as we do. That man wanted to get out of the place with a change of clothes. He got them. Naturally, he'd take the first train to get out of it. Quite right; the gentleman went off by the return mail train at seven-fifteen—almost the very minute when you stood in my office, sir. Think of it!" And he had to clear his dry throat again. "Now, what *I* want to know, sir, is this: Who was he, and why did he want the clothes?"

Ah, but there's more in it than even you think, Mr Spurr! I'll tell you how I can be sure he has got clean away: two of the porters watched him. And why?—they thought it was *you*, sir. One of the first things they told me was that Mr Wilfred Spurr, of the Manor House, had gone up to town by the seven-fifteen. They even said you had looked ill, and the worse for wear, so to speak. That clinches it, I think, sir!”

It did. He stood silent. It required more than a moment to realise that, after being actually powerless within his grasp, Swift—or Manisty—had vanished with the secret, perhaps for ever.

“Rumbustical affair, sir,” remarked Inspector Transome, watching him askance. “Wish I'd been on the spot. Might have been worse, if you hadn't happened to be up so late. I suppose this hat and coat were all he'd been able to grab at before you started up. Seriously, sir, I think it would bear a little looking into!”

Spurr had heard nothing. He felt in his pocket, while the inspector counted as many more leaves as he could for the thickening vapour. Transome looked down in surprise to find something in his hand.

“What's this, sir?” It was gold, and he became quite husky. “Well, I musn't insult you, sir, by refusing; but it's the last thing I looked for. And you can rely upon my discretion, if at any time——”

“I rely upon it now. Good-evening!”

“And if you should think better of it, sir—the hat and coat—I mean, if you'd commission me to look round——”

Spurr had turned. He had almost to grope a way back to the lodge wicket. Just as he passed through he heard the muffled throb of cylinders, and saw two dull red lights looming close. He stood very still to listen. He recognised the voice at once—courteous, musical, but barely as smooth as usual.

“Who is that? Transome? We have driven right into this confounded sea-mist; we left the sun shining at Barrowdene. Nothing I detest more. Whereabouts is the Manor gate? That empty lodge is a standing insult to the place.”

The voice of Gilbert Lancing, most successful man in Felcote. Spurr could just make out his figure leaning from the tonneau of the car. It seemed the most natural thing on earth that Inspector Transome should leap to open the gate as for an emperor.

“You’re almost abreast of it, doctor! Mr Wilfred Spurr has just gone through. A real gentleman, doctor, the new master here. The sort we want—not like the old one!”

“Think so?” The other’s voice hardened, although he laughed. “I know enough already to prefer the old one. Thank you, Transome! Go slowly, Henri!”

Doctor Lancing was calling at the Manor House. Spurr had only time to press back against the evergreen border as the car rumbled past. If its occupant had turned he must have seen; but he did not. His white, handsome, supercilious face craned intently forward; his gloved hands gripping the hood of the vehicle, he was staring over the chauffeur’s shoulder with a strange expression.

Spurr came out on to the gravel sweep five

minutes later. From here, on the slope, he had a full view of what was for him a new and extraordinary sight—the house enveloped by a sea-mist which had crept up without warning. It moved in clammy waves that deadened all sound; at moments it seemed to be a forest of wan arms waving; earth and sky were utterly lost for a time. He could not even be sure if the doctor's car were there still.

Preferring the balcony entrance, he crossed the drawing-room. On the threshold of the hall he paused. He heard Mrs Saxon speak breathlessly:

"No—no, she does not seem to be in the house at all just now. She may have stepped out before the mist came on. Oh, she is much better!"

And then that other voice—slow, melodious, sneering:

"Don't trouble, Mrs Saxon. I certainly should have wished to see her for myself, but, if it is not to be—it is not to be. You know, I shall insist upon her going right away from here for a time. Ah, well, good-evening! Eh? Not at all! As you think, it struck me as slightly strange that she——"

Wilfred Spurr suddenly threw open that door. The light of the hall lamp made out his face to be almost pallid and haggard just then.

"Will you say it in here, and to me, Doctor Lancing?" he asked. "Just a moment—no more!" And the other man, after a curve of the lip, could do nothing but follow him in. The door closed. Spurr turned quickly, and strode close. "Now! We are man to man; we need not pick our words. Let me hear what it is that you consider strange!"

There was no light here. In the gloom, with

that vapour twisting, wreathing and hurrying outside like a living thing in blind, dumb agony, the two men faced. For a moment, silence. Then Gilbert Lancing had fallen back a step. His eyes had quailed. He seemed to divine that some end was in sight.

"You? Pardon me, if I simply refuse to understand," he vouchsafed, in a cold voice that just trembled with hate. "I'll trouble you to let me pass!"

"Not yet. I want you. I overheard a hint that Miss St John had purposely kept out of your way. Just possibly, being a woman of insight, she *has* done that. What then?"

He did not move as the other's white, slim hand shot out and gripped the lapel of his coat. He glanced down at the delicate ringed fingers.

"You seem fond of doing that! It was only the other day that you allowed yourself the same liberty."

"I'll go further!" came in a whisper of suppressed passion. "You wish to force a quarrel with me over her name? You can—you shall! And you shall live to regret it. Who are you—what are you? Does anyone here rightly know?"

"Ask Miss St John," was the unmoved reply. "I will speak of yourself, and definitely. You are a man I should never trust beyond a locked door. On the other hand, I have a deep respect for Miss St John. And so, perhaps, you will make this your last visit here. Send in your bill to me. In any case, her affairs need not concern you from now."

"Nor you! Nor you!" he panted. That deadly pallor had taken in his lips now; around the

pupils of the pale blue eyes was a rim of white.
"You cur! You dare to——"

His gloves were poised for a swish. For a moment it seemed as if nothing in earth or in heaven could stay the blow that, maybe, was all Spurr asked. And just then the door opened. Mrs Saxon entered with a lamp, set it down, and darted an appealing glance at them as she passed. It was enough. Doctor Lancing stooped for his fallen hat. He had recovered his insouciance in that flash of time. He could give a soft little laugh as he turned at the door and realised that the other man would not come to blows for the mere sake of blows.

"Very good, Mr Wilfred Spurr—to give you your reputed full name! Our little difference shall not die of inanition. Remember that, will you not? At any day you wish you can insult me openly, in your approved Western manner, and I shall be pleased to return the compliment with my late groom's horsewhip."

"In the meantime," was the quiet reply, "step out of Miss St John's house—by my orders."

Doctor Lancing bit his under lip upon another inward struggle, bowed, and crossed the hall. The door clanged before Mrs Saxon could reach it. She turned in shocked awe to face the man who was left.

"Hush!" he said soothingly. "I can't enter into anything of that now. Let him go. Where is Miss St John?"

"How can I tell, sir? What could I say? It's all stranger and stranger to me. Miss Sheba has never breathed a word against him, that I know.

She stood in there, touching the piano, as the car came up. The moment his voice sounded I saw her catch up something and fling it around her head. When I ushered him in she had vanished. It all seemed to happen in a moment. What will be said? What will he think?"

"That he is found out." Spurr turned, and wheeled round again, sinking his voice. "I have wanted to ask you—have you said anything to Miss St John about the torn dress? You are sure?"

"Quite!" she whispered excitedly. "I could not. Mr Spurr, when I came to look more closely, I found that two or three of her gowns were missing altogether from the wardrobe. I don't know what to think. She surely cannot know, or she would have spoken. I don't want to worry her just now over a comparative trifle—if it is that!"

"If it is that!" he repeated absently, his eyes looking past her. "Some day, Mrs Saxon, a light will dawn on many things that trouble you and me at this moment. I must see her. I'll find her."

He went out once more, as by some instinct. The magical mist had thinned a good deal in that brief interval; he could make out the blurred outline of trees standing like giant sentinels at their posts. He went carefully around the fringe of the lawn, looking in all directions. Once or twice he even ventured to call, in a low, reassuring voice: "Are you there, Miss St John? All is well!" He was feeling no uneasiness, but he thanked heaven silently to know that a faint breeze from landward was now turning the dark envelope of vapour back to sea. It rolled and twisted past him, leaving patches of soft twilight that widened every moment.

He had come back to the path end, where the house wall turned and the shrubbery began that fenced the lawn on the right. And then of a sudden he fairly sprang forward. It was nothing; and yet it was a definite surprise just then.

"Miss St John! Here? . . . Why, what is it—what has happened? Tell me, at least!"

Unnervingly still, the oval face blanched, a fixed expression in the dilated, velvety eyes, she was standing close against the creepered wall—like one who could shrink no farther. She did not seem to hear the voice. She was listening—listening. He looked carefully all around before he could speak again.

"Come, come!" He was lifting her passive hands, as if he knew he should find them cold and limp. He knew of no reason, but at that moment it seemed asked of his manhood to hold and chafe them in his own warm grasp. Long ago he had divined what a sensitive, delicate organisation pulsed in this frail slip of a woman's figure. "Something has frightened you—but don't let it frighten you now," he said, looking closely down into the unconscious face. And he felt the responsive tremble that thrilled to her finger tips.

"Wait! She'll come back this way. I saw her again—I saw her!" Sheba whispered, half to herself. "It was the same—the figure I followed in that dream. It seemed—it seemed to be my own figure. I followed it down there—into the maze; then I lost it. It went that way to-night—just now. Oh, stand still—let me know—wait with me!"

She was gazing straight ahead down the lawn. At him she could not look. She was like a child

frightened in the night ; there was a cry gathering in her breast that would not sound.

"Yes, yes ; be quite calm ; I am with you," he said steadily. "You know there can be nothing to fear. Yes, you told me. It was something you had dreamed, you thought, and that seemed very real. And the figure has passed you here, in just the same way ? How long ago ?"

"I—I could not tell you. Everything was a blank for a time. I wanted to call out, and could not. You will think me weak and wayward, but I'm not—I am not ! I came out here because—because I did not care to see Doctor Lancing just then. As I stood listening for the car wheels to move it passed me in the mist, hurrying that way. There was no time to say a word or put out a hand, even if I could. Its face was muffled in something, just as it was in the dream—it all came back to me in a cold wave. Oh, you tell me to be brave and calm—tell me first what it means. You are a man. You know—you know !"

He allowed a moment of silence to pass. He held her hands a little more tightly, as she tried to draw them away. He knew that for such a woman there was communicating strength in a hand-clasp. Then he stooped.

"I do not know. But I will tell you what I believe. You did not dream that, Miss St John. It really happened, and might happen again. Yes !—happened when you were moving and thinking in your sleep. It is nothing ; far stranger things than that have taken place. The wonderful part is, that you got back to your room safe, and without anyone knowing. That is only my theory, mind !

But I do know for certainty that a person—even you—could successfully accomplish in that condition something from which they would shudder in their waking moments. You believe me?"

She looked up at him, her lips following the movement of his own. If she understood, she understood something too deep to admit of reply. In her sleep! In her sleep!

"It is all to be made clear some day," he was saying, in that wonderful, soothing voice. "Now, let us think. I wonder—I wonder if you could point out the figure to me? See, the mist is half gone; it will be a warm moonlit night again soon—then you will see things quite differently. There, take my arm, and walk to the end of the lawn. This way! We can keep close along the shrubbery, if you wish. When in fear walk straight toward the object you dread—and it vanishes!"

She obeyed, as if compelled by a superior will-power. Her arm resting upon his, she moved slowly along beside him, their feet making no sound on the shorn grass. No other word was spoken until, glancing back, he saw that the house was quite out of sight.

"Now we'll turn," he whispered. "You see for yourself there is no one here—nothing to——"

"Look!"

It was a breath that thrilled the man through and through again. She drew away, and pointed, little sobs forming and breaking in her throat.

"You—you did not believe me. You could not—no one could. Look! Don't—don't tell me it is not standing there!"

CHAPTER XXI

IF Wilfred Spurr's experience of women was small, no less true was it that nature had given him a rare gift of intuition and adaptation.

There was no time to think. In a flash he had grasped that the great game played by Fate had taken one more dramatic twist to-night—that something might hinge upon his action which should lift the veil surrounding himself and this pure girl whose figure trembled so close against his own.

He had thrown out his arms—placed his hand over her lips. One cry from those lips might ruin all. In a moment he had mastered the situation, taken one swift glance through the thinning haze, and turned, to look deep into Sheba's eyes.

"Silence! Obey me! Try and believe that it was to be! Put your whole faith in me!"

Just that, with the warning pressure of his fingers. And Sheba seemed to understand what was working in his brain. She stood perfectly still, her tremble dying away.

"I do—I will!" she said.

Spurr drew her close back against the shrubbery. He faced round again carefully. A mere dozen paces away, perhaps, the cloaked and hooded figure of a woman had suddenly, soundlessly, taken shape through the slow-moving mist. Just beyond her was looming another—a taller—a

man's figure. The woman seemed to have waited here, and to be beckoning impatiently. The taller figure drew level with apparent reluctance. His coat collar was turned up, half shrouding a colourless face that stared towards the house. Then, just as ethereally, both seemed to glide out of sight as behind a curtain.

Watching as he had never watched yet, Wilfred Spurr racked his memory for a word—and found it :

“The maze !”

Just at that spot, quite nebulous in the vapoury half-light, was the arched entrance to Spartan Loder's queer retreat—the labyrinth that his nephew had so ingloriously essayed to explore. All the recollections of that day crowded back upon Spurr now. It was a woman's figure then that had trod the place like a phantom ; it was a woman's tangible shape to-night which had again struck the note of mystery there. And something else ! He knew, as without knowing, that the same two figures had flown before him in the plantation belt upon another occasion burned in his memory. It was all coming home to him—coming home !

He turned again to Sheba.

“Don't be frightened. That hooded cloak—it is your own, taken from your wardrobe !”

And her eyes gave him the answer that her lips refused.

“And—and,” he whispered on, fitting together link and link before he moved, “you have a delaine robe, with sprays of wisteria blossom worked in silk upon it. It was worn that day by the woman who is wearing your hooded cloak now—the

woman whom you rose to follow in your drugged sleep when she stole in and out of your room—the woman who has crept from the house and back time upon time, trusting to be identified with you. With you!”

A little passionate break had threatened his voice; he checked it instantly. Only a few seconds could have passed since that thrilling breath had left Sheba's lips. Barely five more had been lost before, as in a dream once more, Sheba found herself standing within hand's reach of the arched entrance itself. Wilfred Spurr's arm had drawn her. He would not leave her—would not let her go: whatever was to be faced must be faced by both. They stood motionless now, that arm girdling Sheba's figure as with the tender strength and reassurance of one who could and should be trusted to guard her well.

He was waiting—for what? All was quiet—so quiet that she could hear the slow, thick throb of her own heart against his gripping arm. And then, of a sudden, a faint little glow wavered above that horizontal buttress of privet which shut out the exit to anyone inside the maze. It grew brighter—brighter. Now it was a halo, with a sickly and unreal look. And it was followed by a woman's low laugh—cold, contained, and yet fighting against hysteria, as it sounded.

“I must—I *must* laugh! If you could see your face! It is you who are most afraid!”

“I own it,” was the husky reply. “I am afraid for you—not for myself. Why could you want such a bright glare? Are you aware that it can be seen from every window of the house? Are you

quite lost to your womanhood—to the risks you run?”

“The risk I run in being seen alone with Doctor Gilbert Lancing? What would some women pay for that risk!” She seemed to throw back her head and clasp her hands, as she knelt over the lantern. She seemed to be bent upon some perversity to which he must submit. “Carlotta Barrington, for instance! There, lower the light, as you shake so! You should be grateful for the mist, but you are not. You are a coward when put to the test—I knew that. Yes; fall back on your cigarette—that man’s refuge when he cannot face a woman’s eyes! If I had dared to tell you what I wanted here you would have played me some trick. Now, you cannot. What have you told your chauffeur?”

It was Sister Judith Cottrell. One more, and the last, quiver had gone through Sheba’s figure as she realised the voice that answered. It was tense and thick, but it could only belong to the man who had thrice set himself to win her, and thrice had been beaten back. And Wilfred Spurr knew, too. She heard his teeth give a little click, as that voice came again:

“A lie, of course. The man who identifies himself with a jealous, unscrupulous woman expects to become an expert liar.” Apparently he had been stooping to watch her. Now he straightened up, the crown of his silk hat just visible above the buttress. “It is not that. I am not afraid of his tongue. It is *you* I mistrust. I have kept my faith with you so far, but there is a limit. What is it that you wished to tell me here?”

"Your faith? And why? You meant to break it, but something told you that I was master—that you could never gain your ends without my assistance," came the low, scornful reply. "You dreaded being seen in my company again, and yet you are waiting to snatch at what help I can——"

"Enough of that!" he put in, nervously fierce. "All that was discussed and agreed upon. Say at once what you expect me to risk on your account. So far, mind, I have committed myself to no promise. I am in a dangerous position myself. What is this place? Why are we waiting here? What were you afraid of my knowing?"

"You don't recognise it? You haven't the faintest idea of my errand here? No; how should you?" came the breathless little ghost of a laugh. To listening ears it conveyed that she was staring ahead into the depths of the labyrinth. She sought to gain time, still mistrusting her wisdom in trusting this man with a confidence. "This, Gilbert, is only the maze."

"What!" he whispered sharply.

"The maze. Quite still!—you need not jump to the fear that I wish to leave you in a trap. No; I must tell you something—something that I know well you will never believe. You give me credit, I know, for being able to dare and do many things that the woman of your hopes to-night would shrink from as an angel might shrink from a devil. But—the irony of it!—I dare not venture through this place alone!"

The man's breath was drawn hissingly, incredulously, through his teeth.

"I said you were mad—and you are! What do

you mean? In heaven's name, what is behind all this? Curse everything——"

"Never mind what I mean. And don't dare to speak in that tone to me again! One day, Gilbert——"

"Go on! Go on! My car's waiting!"

"Let it wait. One day I had a shock here, and not all the money in the world could tempt me to repeat the experience. Mad or not, I tell you, if I went along that path alone now, I should suddenly stop and scream—scream! And yet it had to be done, and after dark; and I determined that you should help me. Because we know so much of each other's secret hopes and fears that we are bound to trust each other to a certain point. Don't fear!" she broke off witheringly. "I won't overstep the limit! You're a man. Take up the lamp, and keep close behind me—that is all you have to do!"

"But why?" he insisted. "What on earth can you want in this place, at this time of night?"

She said something to herself, and stood silent for a minute, as if asking herself whether she dared rely upon herself alone. Then her voice, more calm and characteristic, came again:

"It is nothing to you. Believe that, if you believe nothing else. There are some papers in this maze I want, and have waited day after day to obtain. As no opportunity came, I have made one. Yes, papers—here, in the maze! You shall see all in a moment; at least, you shall satisfy yourself that that is all I require. Meanwhile, you are at my mercy. Follow me quietly, and you can be back in your house in thirty minutes; and

there is no one in the world to call *you* to account for those minutes. To-night or never, I say. Candidly, if you refuse, I care nothing what happens. I should take care that you—you, Gilbert Lancing, with such a reputation at stake—are involved in the scandal. I fear the place, I tell you—I, who fear nothing else in the world! And it was that same man, that lion in your own path, who put the fear into me. Now do you understand?"

"That man—Spurr?"

"Spurr! Yes; how you love him!" she went on, in the terribly calm, mocking voice. "He was here when I came alone for those papers—child's work as it was to me then. For all I knew, he had found out something, and meant to forestall me. I was only sure of one thing: he had no plan of the place, and, without that, was like a man wandering in a jungle. Spurr! He hunted me from path to path, till the place seemed full of eyes, alive with hands waiting to clutch me. Only the precaution I had taken beforehand saved me that day."

"Spurr!" He seemed to grind his teeth, to strain out his slim, white hands in a passion that obscured all else. "Heavens, if I had dared, that night! If I held him here now as I held him then! I could kill him—I could face the consequences! I was never nearer it than I was to-night. It wanted but one movement—one more word; and he knows it. And the time will come yet!"

"Ah!" she breathed eagerly. "You realise that you owe your downfall to him. Hear this!

These papers—these papers I want are the very documents that would open his eyes, tell him all he burns to know. Let me get them, let me place them out of his reach, and you are more than revenged, if you knew it. And—and, through me, you could make him buy them back at your own price. Your own price—Sheba! . . . Quick, the lamp! I can come at them in a few minutes. If only you will——”

“Yes! But what if we were discovered—in case you lost your way——”

“Fool! It is here, written on my brain. I know every path by heart. I possess the one and only plan to the maze; up in that room I have sat and studied it while the others slept. What would they have given for that plan! Day after day I have looked out from those windows, knowing that practically I could stretch out my hands and make sure of the papers; and yet my every attempt to nerve myself has failed. I dared not venture farther than this spot; it seemed that the hand was waiting in the darkness to grip me. I knew, if only a twig touched me, I must lose my precious sanity. That shall not happen to me!” she panted. “Not now; not now I am so near accomplishing all I live to do. Don’t pester me with your questions; it is your policy to keep me quite calm. What is it to you, just to keep close to me, even if you loathe me so! You have a man’s strength, and you know nothing of a woman’s inner feelings. Say yes or no, at once—at once!”

“One moment!” the man gasped. These papers: when you have them—what then? What are they?

If they could be used against me afterwards in any way—if she were to hear——”

“You unutterable coward!” Judith Cottrell whispered, with scorn indescribable. “Must I say it again? I ask you to risk nothing—nothing! Cannot you understand? This concerns myself alone. I have something to do; I dare not put it off a day longer. I am suspected on all sides—perhaps even watched. Only one person in that house has a good word for me—Mrs Saxon! The papers lie simply where they have lain, perhaps, for years. I want them. Hurry, hurry, while the mist holds! This way! It is so simple; and yet there is only one person living to-night who knows where and why Spartan Loder . . .”

CHAPTER XXII

THE voice had died away as they die in a dream. All was silence again.

And then Wilfred Spurr came to himself, and ventured to look down into the pale, oval face of the woman who had listened with him. He would not speak ; his eyes alone asked the swift question, and Sheba read it.

"No," she said softly ; "I am not afraid—not now. Don't think of me at all. Act for the best, think only of yourself!"

For the best ! It was a wild, whirling moment. What to do ? Leave her there, and run back to the house for assistance?—or strike at once after those two sinister figures through the windings of the maze ? Till this hour he had stubbornly put Judith Cottrell out of his thoughts—wished to forget that such a woman had an existence in the same house. But a revelation had gone through his brain like lightning through darkness. Those papers!—they must be had at any cost ! That mere thought baffled sane reflection. Did he hesitate, the chance might be swept away from him.

He would not. Before either fairly realised, his arm had fallen away from Sheba's slight figure. He caught her hand, drew her forward, and they were in the maze.

That wavering glow was just vanishing at the end of a path on the extreme left. Judith knew !

—that central avenue led nowhere. They hurried silently forward—and now it was only just ahead of them, glimmering along a path to the extreme right. They drew up for a second, their fingers unconsciously interlocked in suspense, and then pressed forward once more. Yet again sharply to the left, one more abrupt turn to the right, and then Spurr had roughly grasped Spartan Loder's main scheme. Simplicity itself—when known! The route to the heart of the maze was shaped like a length of closed trelliswork—from left to right at an angle, and vice versa. All intersecting paths were so many distracting blinds. The one difficulty could be in keeping to the true angles.

With never a pause, as steadily as if each turning possessed a number tallying with one upon her mental chart, that weird figure of Sister Judith went forward; the tall, stooping man with the grey kid gloves and silk hat, looking strangely out of place in this environment, close behind her. The halo from his lantern danced just ahead of them, dimmed by a thin veil of mist. It had become a mechanical tramp; Sheba knew only that her fingers were held and that her feet moved. Her heart-beats seemed to be suspended, until of a sudden Spurr's teeth gave that little click again. She could just keep back a cry, as he drew her aside into a patch of shadow and held her motionless with his strong arms.

"Look!" he whispered.

She looked, and would never in life forget.

They were upon the rim of a circular open space or clearing. That wavering glow showed that the ground sloped slightly up to a knoll in

the centre ; and there upon the knoll, shaped like a conical beehive of glass and ironwork, stood the little pavilion where dead Spartan Loder had passed so many hours alone with his thoughts and—what ?

The dead man's spirit seemed to hover here—to wave them coldly back. They were like intruders in the vault of some old cathedral. Sheba strained every faculty for the sake of the man beside her, but nothing seemed real to her—she would never be able to believe that it had actually happened.

The cloaked and hooded woman's figure had stolen forward alone, pushed open a creaking door, and stared into the silent pavilion. Silent ? It was as if the fall of a feather could be heard ; as if the throb of a pulse had sound. Sister Judith had shuddered back as though the dead man's eyes—guardian of his treasure—had stared back at her.

She stole forward again, framed in the wavering light. Now she was down upon her knees. There was the continuous clink as of some metal lever feverishly at work. Just behind, his face yellow and ghastly as he held up the lantern, his sick eyes staring from left to right, leaned Doctor Gilbert Lancing. To him, too, perhaps, the scene had no connection with actual life. He was in the grip of deadliest fear and misgiving—his thoughts were not with those of the kneeling woman there. He had started convulsively as she suddenly swayed upright and faced him, both hands drawn up tightly against her breast.

"Found !" thrilled her breath, trembling, ecstatic. "Mine ! I win ! Your turn next ! You hear ?—your turn next !"

Found! There came the hollow clang, as of a stone slab sinking back into its frame. She held up something for a second—put it to her lips; then it had been thrust into her dress folds—she would trust not even the man standing there. It had seemed so superlatively easy! She was clutching his shoulder as with a back-rush of that fear of the silent place where the secret had lain unsuspected so long.

“Gilbert! what was that? You heard nothing—nothing? Swear it!” she broke out in a gasping wail. “Yes, take me away! It is stifling me—it is pressing upon my brain! Eyes—eyes—everywhere!” Her veering fingers pointed past him. “Just there—just down that path! As near as that I had got safely, and still he came creeping on tiptoe after me; his face looked at me. God!—if he had known! I had brought a knife with me—yes, a knife. I must have used it. But it was her dress—her dress that closed his lips and saved me. No, no—this way—not as we came! To the left this time—then to the right. Don’t let me lose my thoughts now. Quick!”

She flitted forward; the man stumbled after her; they were gone. It was a full minute before Wilfred Spurr could throw off his stupefaction, much less take in that the thing was an accomplished fact. And then, as he made to start in pursuit, he had to grasp that the hand still gripped within his own had been growing lifeless and cold.

“Miss St John! Sheba—no!” He called her huskily by that name, as the new dread swept him. “Quick, they are gone. Sheba, for all you hold dear, be brave a little longer! Set your teeth—hold my arm! I dare not stir a step from you!”

"Yes, leave me! You go—come back!" her lips would just say.

"Never! Oh, help me, if you can! Try once more—look up—think what it may mean for both. Just the one great effort! If you only could—for your own sake!"

His sunken, imploring breaths had seemed to be calling to her across a widening gulf. What it cost her to make the effort he need never know, but she laid her hands upon his, forced her closing eyes to stare up, and then presently, with a little sob, had fought back the woman's weakness and drawn herself free, to prove it.

"You go!" she begged. "You go on! I can follow—I shall not fail you now!"

"Bless you for that!"

The words choked up gratefully in his throat. He sprang forward, ever glancing over his shoulder to be sure that her strength was equal to her courage. From left to right—from right to left; he repeated the formula to himself as he pressed along the shadowy, coffin-like paths, realising what one mistake might mean. The glimmering lantern was shut out now, but he would not pause. And at last his heart gave a rare leap. He could have shouted; he felt like a man who had crawled from some dark pit into sunlight.

There was the arched slit of an entrance; and there, indistinctly outlined against the misty lawn beyond, were the two figures. For the last time he pressed Sheba's arm.

"That was great—great! Safe now! Stand quite still—we may soon know all!"

It was the merest murmur, that none but herself could possibly have heard. But, just as he turned

to steal stooping forward, the face of the hooded woman had turned, and she had given that straining cry :

“Look! Betrayed! He knows! Spurr—Spurr! —the man for ever in your path!”

And what next? The blind rush, and then—partial chaos. It was all or nothing now, and Spurr had taken his leap—the leap that would bring his hand against Sister Judith’s throat. The papers! For the moment he had forgotten Gilbert Lancing completely—would have sprung past, to remember and deal with him later. But Lancing was not to realise that in a flash.

“The man in your path!”

That cry of hers rang in his ears. Stung above all by the knowledge that he was unmasked by the very man he had most reason to hate, goaded by opportunity, he launched his body forward at an angle and struck out a shower of blows. They checked the other man’s determined rush, and gave Sister Judith her precious moment. Next instant, maddened by the sight of her figure slipping away through the mist, Spurr had closed with his opponent, to fling him out of the way like a dog.

Grinding, straining, panting, their locked figures swayed to and fro on the slippery turf. Spurr had knotted both hands behind the slighter man’s waist, and was tightening every muscle for a throw that should spell finality; but for the minute Gilbert Lancing’s blaze of passion and length of reach balked him. Those slim fingers had wound themselves about Spurr’s throat in a suffocating clutch that throttled his effort to shout. Twice he shook himself free of it by a supreme

effort, and twice the red mist gathered before him as the fingers found their grip again. He became still as he realised. Lancing's breath was puffing in sharp bursts; he fought and moaned like a man who knew that he must be beaten and dreaded most the humiliation.

"Curse you—curse you!" he foamed, his blue eyes flaming. "You sha'n't go—you can't get away! You shall carry my mark—know that you owed it to me. You can't get away—no!"

And then—wough! He was swung up like a dead stick, and thrown heavily. He made a convulsive attempt to struggle up again, but collapsed, his fingers twitching upon the lawn grass. Wilfred Spurr staggered clear, staring, wiping the sweat from his forehead—to realise that Sheba stood motionless there.

"Miss St John!" he gasped. "Quick—that woman! Back to the house, while I take the road!"

But she heard nothing. She stood as if changed into marble.

"Through me!" he heard her say, as to herself. "It has happened through me. You have killed him—killed him!"

"Miss St John! Don't!—see for yourself!" He had drawn her forward, and made her stoop in the twilight. "He is barely stunned—it is nothing. You don't realise! Those papers—we are losing them! Quick!"

Five minutes, perhaps—scarcely more—had ticked by since that cry from Sister Judith's lips, when Wilfred Spurr burst through the drawing-room, with that shout of "Mrs Saxon!" The hall was clear; no one answered. He sprang up the

main staircase. Just as it happened, Mrs Saxon was sweeping toward him down the branch corridor, and paused in stupefaction at his face.

"Miss Sheba!" she whimpered at once. "What is it—what has happened?"

"No—no! That woman!" he panted. "Guard all the doors. If she is here, she shall not leave the house until——"

"Who?—who? What woman? Can you mean Sister Judith?" She clapped her hands, and drew back, as a light broke in upon her. "Mr Spurr, you must have passed her. Passed her! She went down the stairs not two minutes ago. The nurse—Miss Cottrell—yes!"

"Went *down*? But—but she could hardly have got to her room in the time!" He hesitated, drawn all ways by a dozen different impulses.

"I'm positive!" Mrs Saxon declared. "She passed me at the top. She was hurrying, and did not answer me. I thought it strange—she had on her hat and jacket, and was carrying that sealskin bag of hers. Come and look in her room, sir, if you don't——"

The rest was lost. Spurr was half-way down the stairs, and stumbling across to the hall door. Out upon the drive he paused. Quite dark now, and nothing to be seen. The blood pulsing at fever-heat through his veins, he set off down the avenue. He was near the gate when his heart took that jump. He leaped aside into the shrubbery and gripped at something—an arm that had pushed through the evergreens. A head followed it. He could only just whisper, so keen was the disappointment:

"Transome—you!"

"I'm afraid you're right, sir! I never expected to see Mr Wilfred Spurr again to-night, though!"

"But—but what are you doing here? Quick!" And Transome wiped his lips.

"Don't take it amiss, sir! I was having a little private look round the place, on that little matter of ours. I feel sure—— Anything wrong, Mr Spurr? That's the second shock I've had in one minute. It's not that time ago since I saw Doctor Lancing limp by me and across the grounds—that white and queer-looking, I couldn't find my voice. And then you——"

"Hark!" Spurr shot up his finger. There was the distant hum of cylinders puffing and wheels starting. "Lancing!" he breathed to himself. "He has got away—I can do nothing!" Once more he shook the startled inspector by the shoulder. "You saw no one else—no sign of a woman anywhere?"

"Not the ghost of one, sir—or I *might* have started wondering!"

Spurr whispered. The two men started off together. But the trail was lost. In truth, it had never been found.

Two hours later that night all Felcote knew that Doctor Gilbert Lancing had been suddenly summoned away to the north on vital business, and might be away for an indefinite period. The probable name of his locum-tenens was already being discussed.

And the woman—Sister Judith Cottrell?

She had dropped out of sight as a falling star vanishes down the firmament.

And with her had gone the secret which Spartan Loder had so nearly carried to his grave.

CHAPTER XXIII

A MILD, balmy evening, one week later. Soft, silent rain had been falling for hours, and the London pavements gleamed blackly; but now the tearful south-west wind had given way to a breeze from the west alone. It puffed a final spray of drops against the closely veiled face of a woman alighting from a hansom at the corner of a thoroughfare in quiet Brixton. She paused a second, to let someone go by, and glanced up at the street name on the wall.

"You said Ardilaun Street, ma'am, and this is it," remarked the cabman.

"I know; I know it quite well. I may want you—wait here until I return!"

Those few steady words, and she had moved swiftly on before the cabman could whistle, much less reply that the day of deferred fares had gone by. Only a woman could have done it in that calm way!

It was at Number 19 that she drew up. Twice she passed and repassed, watching the light behind a bay window on the right. Then presently a faint shadow wavered over the blind. Instantly she was at the door, and had knocked. Bending back, she had time to see that light in the bay window go lower and lower. And then the door was opened slowly. From the space of a few inches a woman stared suspiciously out at the veiled face.

"Again!" she said significantly.

"Precisely. I told you that I meant to see Mr Manisty. I keep to my word, you see."

"You do, eh? And I told you that you had come to the wrong house for your purpose, miss—or madam!"

"Are you so sure of that?" queried the dull, quiet voice, just tinged with irony. "You might look at this! Have you ever seen such a card as that before?"

"Oh, yes; and handled them; and wished to heaven I had never had the opportunity. I have no idea what you may be to the gentleman, but I tell you this for the third and last time: he went abroad somewhere. Where, is not my business. At anyrate, he has gone from here."

"I am sorry—on his account! I expected that answer, however, and I took the trouble to watch. A lie! Not your lie, but his. Look there!" She pushed back the door suddenly, and calmly pointed to a hall stand. "Yes; there it is. I saw it before, you know. Perhaps he left you that hat and fur-trimmed travelling ulster in part payment of a debt? Yes; that would be it!"

"You're very keen—even for a lady detective!" stammered the woman. "I believe the gentleman had more than one expensive outfit. He had rooms here, too, once upon a time. When you show me your ticket of authority I'll conduct you over my house. Meantime, it's private. Good-evening, miss—or madam!"

"I understand." The veiled visitor, her hand still upon the door, raised her voice slightly. "Will you tell him, as soon as you have closed this door,

that he had nothing to fear, but a great deal to gain? He has lost something, at anyrate, worth a more ingenious story than yours. He may think again. I can wait out here."

A pause. In that pause a door on the right opened a few inches. A face—haggard, hunted, unshaven—peered out for a glimpse of the visitor. It was enough. Before the face could withdraw she had pointed, with a little catch of her breath:

"That is he! Let me speak—let him hear me! You need have no distrust this time, Mr Swift—I mean, Mr Manisty! I have waited nearly a week, with some news of a house by the sea. Not long ago you would have risked life and soul for that news. I can give it to you—for nothing!"

The long, animal-like stare. He feared—yet wondered. Then he had stepped out, with an attempt at a sickly bow. He looked from one woman to the other, a hand to his throat, as if prepared for collusion. But the one he knew was drawn back stiffly, and the other had craned forward with a searing whisper:

"What was behind the clock? Think back!"

The hunted eyes flinched. The hoarse rattle of a voice sounded at once:

"Come in here! I have been ill, and could see no one. I gave my housekeeper those orders—don't blame her!"

He held open his door. The visitor paused, and felt in a sealskin bag.

"Wait a moment. You owe her money?"

And the woman laughed bitterly.

"Oh, a mere nothing! What are twenty pounds

or so to a gentleman whose ship is always on the point of coming home?"

"Ah! It may come home—yet," came the other woman's calm whisper. "Twenty? I have not nearly so much with me; if I had you should have it. I am in the curious frame of mind that does not value money; I have no further use for a superfluity of it." She caught her breath again in a sound almost like a hard sob suppressed. Spell-bound, fascinated, they watched her gloved fingers unroll a strip of rustling paper. "Yes, only a five-pound note. Yours, if it is of any use to you. He may be able to settle his bill, with a bonus—soon."

Manisty's eyes glittered and watered. His voice rattled:

"Not another like that to spare?"

He fell back. She had turned on him with that searing, contemptuous breath.

"You! Wait! Wait, and see if you care to pay my price!"

They were two against one, but she appeared never to have known the meaning of the word "fear." It was she who entered the sitting-room first, pointed him to stand at the far side of a centre table, and closed and locked the door. She did it all with a calm, compelling power hypnotic in its effect. It cowed the clever, daring criminal as nothing else could have done; he knew not what might underlie the position; it was as if a tamer had suddenly entered the cage and crackled a whip. And, after all, the man was little more than an animal. She seemed to be thinking that as she stood so still and watched him. She meant that he should speak first; and he did.

"Well? Who are you? Who sent you?" the dry lips asked.

"Stand perfectly still—keep your place there! No; she is not a police-agent, Mr Manisty! Simply a woman; or, rather, that very different thing—a woman scorned! Perhaps you won't understand that; your intelligence has moved in other spheres of thought, I believe. For just this moment I am the woman who holds *you* in the hollow of her hand. Realise that."

"Who *are* you?" he muttered, wiping his lips again. "I never feared a woman yet. Up with that veil!"

He was moving round for a leap toward the door.

She simply waited, pointing him back to his place. And, intuitively recognising hidden power and resources that might have prepared a trap, he slowly obeyed the finger.

"Now! We understand each other; I need not keep you in that suspense." She flashed up the veil, and leaned toward him. There was the hard, stone-like face; there brooded the fathomless eyes, with that suggestion of mockery flickering in their depths; there were the thin lips, compressed in cold, unalterable purpose. "You do not know me? You should! Has my face never looked at you in the night? Do you remember how eagerly you sought it once—how you looked round and round an oak-panelled room to find me? . . . What is the matter? You never feared a woman yet!"

Fear? No, that was not the word. Step by step he had retreated back to the wall, and stood there, his twitching hands out as in delirium tremens,

his ash-grey lips refusing to sound the words that rattled in his throat.

"Yes; I see that Mr Manisty remembers clearly. And you understand what it may mean for you. That will do!" she said, with her terrible quietness. "I have not had time to alter materially, have I? When I last saw *you*, you wore a beard—like someone who shall be nameless. And your face was stained—*his* colour. I had guessed you would be hiding near the house, waiting some chance to land the coup of your career; and I guessed dread and hunger would eventually drive you off—back here to London. If you had known!

"Listen! In that house there was one woman who could have spared you all that trouble, agony, and failure. But we were at cross-purposes; I could never hope to come near you. The papers you wanted! Remember it? I do; every word that he uttered that night. A tin box, wrapped in cloth, hidden behind the clock pendulum. The directions in that box were to take you, and you only, to the spot where he had placed his will—and the deeds! You missed them by the space of a few minutes. While you were hesitating and bracing your nerves—heaven knows, I can understand that hesitation!—while you were listening and watching to be sure, someone had dared and done. You follow me?"

Yes, he followed her. It was a refinement of cruelty to ask it—to pause. She went calmly on:

"Someone had turned out the hall light below and gained a moment's darkness in which to forestall you. You would have failed, in any case. Only a woman could have used those few inter-

vening seconds successfully—only a woman, I mean, who had nothing more to live for than to efface herself! You missed them, and so lost the clue to the will and the deeds. And it is I who have them—here!

“No; please don’t move! I know exactly what flashed through your brain, but it can die out again. I know my world thoroughly now, and despise it more deeply than I can tell you. And yet, low as I have fallen to-night in coming here with a purpose, I prefer to keep just this distance between myself and a man who——”

Another pause. She seemed to listen to the low roar of London’s traffic all around them. She seemed to think for the last time. Then it came:

“——a man who should be awaiting his trial for murder in cold blood.”

CHAPTER XXIV

“MURDER!”

Quietly spoken, the most awful of all known words died away and seemed to come back to the room in an echo, to remain there. Manisty had strained both hands to his ears, as if to shut it out. His staring eyes looked past her at the door—the look of a man who thought there must surely come a drumming at the panels. Time upon time that something rattled in his throat—almost like the sound of pebbles shaken in a box. Minutes had passed before he could believe that the silence held—that he could speak.

“Who? What—what do you mean by that?” he asked thickly.

“Let it pass if you intend to take that attitude.” Sister Judith’s immovable face, the lips still set in that tigerish curve, watched him with steady contempt. “I have only to go from here and speak out, to prove to you what I mean. I need only restore this name-card of yours to the gentleman who shall be nameless, and by to-morrow an end would come to the mystery that is eating to-night into a woman’s heart. You follow me?—you know the woman I mean? Her name was entrusted to you in connection with a will, if you remember. Sheba! And do you—can you guess the one reason why I have not spoken out?”

“No—no! Go on!” the man moaned in his torture.

"I could have saved that woman all this terror and suffering; and I would not. Because I have come to hate her. Because she has looked at me in a way that a woman like myself never forgets nor forgives. Because, by speaking out, I should have put into her hands that vast fortune—the fortune which you came all the way to Felcote to steal!"

"Sheba! Sheba!" he muttered, crouching away from the recollection. "The girl who—the girl he expected me to——" It would not take shape in words.

And Judith Cottrell smiled. Such a smile! At least, if she had lost for ever the soft grace and sweetness of true womanhood, she had won a power in its place: the power to subdue, and to speak in low tones that cut into him like a lash.

"Exactly! You fully admit that you were in Felcote that night! Now we can come to plain words. Yes; Miss Sheba St John—the girl who welcomed you on the staircase—the precious ward, or protégé, of Spartan Loder!"

She leaned forward again, her gloved hands resting on the table edge. There was no fear now but that he would listen to the end.

"You are taking it for granted, perhaps, that I am as black as yourself, or I would not speak in this way. But you are mistaken. I shall never ask for your private history, nor attempt to give you mine; I shall tell you just enough for my purpose. Listen carefully!"

"Till I entered that house at Felcote I was merely a bitter, silent woman, quite prepared to bear for life a chain and halter that only the

scorned woman knows. But, once there, I sprang back to life, in a sense. I found out! This very woman, this Sheba St John, was the cause of my broken life. I could never learn to forgive her, and so I learned to hate her, and schemed to balk her—a girl upon whom Fate was smiling at every turn, while it persistently mocked me. And now—now it has come to this! I would jeopardise the remainder of my life to make her feel one tithe of what I have suffered. Because, like her, I happened to have a heart!”

She paused—undesignedly this time. Her throat was working; a tremor seemed to run through her. Then her figure had stiffened coldly again; she went on:

“Never mind! The inner story of it all will never be told now; and you would not grasp subtleties. You’re a mere thing of bone and muscle; you would go to crime for crime’s own sake, while I might shudder at the necessity that drove me. Simply this!

“Spartan Loder, as he let me know in his mutterings—and as he told you plainly that night—left all his wealth to that man, the real Wilfred Spurr, on one condition. Melodramatic, I grant, but written there in black and white, that the law might or might not think fit to set aside. He must marry precious Sheba, to protect her from a hard world! Yes, a hard world!—he knew something of it!

“In a novel, of course, it would inevitably turn out that the old man had over-reached himself in one vital point—the nephew would be already tied to a wife. Here, as it happened, there is no

obstacle whatever in the way ; all dovetailed so beautifully that one might almost credit Spartan Loder with second sight ! We are handling facts, however. This will states it, in clearest terms : this will for which they have been hunting night and day. Before ever I heard of a man named Manisty I had a plan of my own that promised some sort of revenge. But *you* came upon the scene. The devil sent you. You played straight into my hands, and gave me a far better one ! ”

“ What was it ? ” he had to whisper. She seemed to be waiting for it ; or else her mind had swung back to the moment when that plan wrote itself upon the wall in letters of flame.

“ What was it ? Can you ask ? He shall never wed her in this life. He shall never even know of the stipulation in the will. The money shall not pass into her possession through him. The mystery of it all shall remain with her night and day for life. And that will be the fullest revenge I could ask ! ”

“ You mean—— ” That first shaft of fear, that had left his nerves raw upon the surface, was dying out of him. He was fascinated by the tentative something in her manner. If nothing else, it had told him that there was more to come—some compromise by which he could save and enrich himself.

“ I mean this ! ” She sank her measured, scornful voice. “ You heard what I said ? I have the title-deeds of the silver mine, and the will—here. It cost me days of watching and scheming to get them, but all that is paid for now. I am looking only to the future. The man whom I

relied upon to help me has failed me. He is a dastardly coward, and has fled from the scene in very dread of the woman whose heart he himself turned to a thing of stone. Let him go—out of my life! And so, I have been forced to come to *you*. Why? Because I hold a sword over you. I know, alone in this world, that you shortened Mr Loder's life by minutes, at least. Silence! If only by a bare minute, you shortened that man's term on earth; and the law has only one name for that. No; stand back!—I am past all fear of such a man as you!”

“You lie! It's a lie!” he gasped, the damp thick upon his face. “It would have happened in any case. He was dying as I stood there!”

“I knew it. But your whole fear was that he might live just long enough to tell his real nephew what he had told you, and so wreck in a moment the scheme you had built up so elaborately. You had crossed the seas—you had given months of thought to that final effort to recover the deeds. Your face alone at this moment would condemn you unheard. Deny that you laid a hand over his lips. Deny that!”

And there was silence—terrible silence.

“You cannot!” she whispered, leaning back. “You were desperately afraid. Twice you searched the room. But it is only now that you hear of a wire-covered ventilator that opened into the next apartment—my own room. Just opposite his bed! I watched you. I had used that ventilator before. I heard every word of his—or all that I wished to hear, to give me that inspiration. And I *saw*!”

She had discarded for ever the dove-grey garb of the nurse; but the atmosphere and memories of the calling seemed to cling about her. At moments her voice was as soft as though she were stooping in imagination above a helpless patient. Strange, awful, it seemed to hear a woman—the woman whose deft fingers had so often lain across a fevered brow, whose eyes had remained tireless throughout so many a midnight watch—giving the recital in that calm, deliberate way. It was like a person watching a critical surgical operation, and feeling never a tremor as the knife worked its slow way along the line dividing life and death.

Steeped in scheming as he was, deep as he had descended in his bid for the hidden hoards of Spartan Loder, his father's partner at the mine, Manisty listened in stupefaction. This was a phase he had never yet grappled with in his experience—and a development he had little counted upon. He was still in the dark upon many points; but he saw his chance, and was quick to grip it.

"Then—then," he rattled, pointing at her, "if you saw what you say, I charge you with being a passive accessory to the act. You fully realised, but made no attempt to prevent it, or to bring the criminal to book!"

Across the table his eyes stared defiance into hers. For that one moment, and that only, she lost a measure of her wonderful self-possession—or, maybe, sickened at the thoughts in her own mind. Every day she had told herself that—she must strike her blow soon, or not at all. There was ever that menacing fear of insanity!

"Fool!" she breathed quiveringly. "Fool! I

did not realise the meaning of it in time, or it would never have happened. I could no more prevent what passed in that moment's darkness than I could force my lips to cry out. I could do nothing without compromising myself. You are forgetting! Till that moment, when your stealthy movements stirred my quick suspicions, I was thinking you the real and only Wilfred Spurr! All I had wanted was to hear his revelation—to know for a certainty how *she* stood in his will. The instant my suspicions of you took shape, and I knew Sheba St John was to marry the heir to that fortune, all my plans changed. I formed another and acted upon it simultaneously. You think me a witch, a wonder, no doubt; yet there is nothing wonderful in it from beginning to end. I have succeeded so far simply because I cared little for the consequences to myself. I played the spy from time to time, and the threads came to my hand in quick succession. From Spurr's own lips I heard all the story of your scheme; I had only to connect it with what I knew already from Mr Loder's own talk. In the same hour I obtained your real name and address here through a card of yours he left lying upon the table. While he hunted for me—the spy—I had returned by another door and got what I wanted; because, you see, it suddenly occurred to me what use, as a last resource, I could make of a man of your stamp! There was only the fear that he might employ his detectives to trap you here. But he had forgotten the address; and, again, he shrinks from the publicity on her account—his heart is as sensitive as yours is black! But, mind, he will work slowly

on ; his moment will come ; he is not a man to be balked of his rights. Shall I tell you something? He was here, in Brixton, only a day or two back. I saw him—passed him. On every hand there are the wheels working within wheels. And so, time presses! You shall leave Brixton at once, and hide until the moment comes to act. And, in return, I hand over to you the deeds of Spartan Loder's Nevada Silver Mine—the deeds of which, now that Loder is dead and we alone possess his secret, nothing can dispossess you!"

"The deeds!" He looked beyond her, whispering it incredulously. "She has them—here! The deeds that my father wasted years of his life to discover ; the deeds that I swore to him I would get back, if only I lived long enough! . . . What—what is it I am to do?"

"I have told you, in plain words: to prevent her marriage with Wilfred Spurr—to make her feel what I have felt!"

"Marriage? Is that all? No, there's some price—the price of your silence! You want money raised to carry this out?"

"Money! Don't utter that word to me. Don't deceive yourself! I propose to use you just as I should set a rat-trap—a trap to catch that proud, smiling dove! Yes, you stare ; you are not likely to understand the agony that can grow and grow in a woman's mind, till death itself is the only alternative to revenge. I live for that—I must have it! . . . I'll ask you this: Have you ever cared for a woman and lost her because another man came between you and her?"

He could not or would not answer it. That flicker in the fathomless eyes held him spellbound

as by the stare of a serpent poised to strike. Hate so deep, so abiding, that she would keep this silence and put a million of money into his hands—for revenge upon another woman!

Her slow voice reached him again.

"You have not, I see! I'll tell you. It may nerve you to be sure of me when you shrink from your task. Once in my colourless life, not long ago, I loved a man. I do not say that I would have died for him—I am scarcely that type of woman; but he had won my whole love. And then, he drew himself away—cold, sneering, loveless! Another woman had dawned upon his artistic comprehension. Yes; Sheba!—Sheba St John. I watched; I found out, too late. She had refused him, spurned him; but that could not alter the living fact that she had blasted my life. I did not want him then; it was the secret humiliation of it that has worked my ruin. He will forget me: he is a man—he will marry some other woman; he can go. But *she*—she shall know! To-night I exist only to prove that a woman's hate for another woman is the one thing on earth that never dies!"

"Stop! I'll promise!" He bent across to her. "I understand. I'll promise what you like. Give me the deeds, and you shall have your payment in full. Whatever is in your mind, you can trust me."

"Trust you?" Judith Cottrell laughed, without seeming to relax a muscle of the hard, passionless face. "I trust no one now save myself. No; you shall trust me!"

"How? What do you mean? Speak out!"

"I mean that these papers remain in my possession until I am satisfied. And, moreover, knowing the man you are, I make a stipulation. No harm

is to come to her—and none to this Wilfred Spurr, who stands in the way of your object still. I played the Delilah with him, but he was too keen to be caught by that bait. He may be too keen for you, unless you are careful. You may prove him dead to the American authorities for your own purposes; but it shall be one more lie, and a lie only. Now! I have wasted a week already in trying to see you. I shall be in London for two days more, maturing my plans; and then—yes, I shall dare it. I shall go down to Felcote and demand my boxes—demand the cheque for my services there. Spurr may have gone by then; even if not he can do nothing. He can prove nothing against me—knows nothing as yet of what the papers really contained. And he is still in fear of a scandal that must bring dear Miss Sheba into the witness-box! I will have my boxes, and I will have the pleasure of tearing the cheque to atoms and throwing them at her feet. I want to look once again into her eyes—once again! Keep this card; if there is anything you must say to me before four o'clock on Wednesday afternoon—the time of my train down—you can do so by——”

“Yes, yes! I see all that; I only ask to see the papers once!” he put in, with a great effort to appear calm. For so long the rustle of those documents had mocked his dreams—danced before him like a marsh light; and to-night they were within arm's reach!

“Not once,” she said decisively. “I am not taking you into my confidence as a confederate. To me these papers are worthless: they simply represent a chance of money—and money will not

buy back a woman's heart and happiness. To you, as I understand it, they may mean a dozen fortunes in one. So he said, and so your face shows! And so you can afford to wait a little longer. Wait and watch in the background, as I have done for months. Let them drift together—those two! There is no need of the will to bring that about; the love is there, waiting to burst into flame—unless I make the mistake of my life. She was Cinderella waiting for her Prince, although she did not realise it. Wait! Wait until the love has absorbed her, as mine did. It may not be long! She listens already for the ring of his voice, the sound of his step! I have seen it all—I know the signs. Wait! He is to hurry back West, sell his farms, and 'settle down.' What does that mean? To hurry back and marry her! Let him go, all in ignorance of the will and the wealth. And then——"

"Then——" Manisty repeated, as sunkenly as if he were afraid of his own voice, even now.

"This, if nothing spoils my last hope. Once again—once again you shall play your part of Wilfred Spurr!—and this time there must be no hitch, no failure! . . . Are you so dull—you? You shall intercept his letters home to Felcote, write in his name to say that you have arrived back at Liverpool, personate him, make sure of your ground and your opportunity, say that your plans have altered, grow colder and more brutal each time that you meet her, hint at a woman in Toronto, and—break that proud heart, as mine was broken! Then, and not before, these papers are yours, for ever!"

The stipulated two days were gone.

It was Wednesday, and nearly eight o'clock. The stars, those "forget-me-nots of the angels," were just peering down through a sky like blue-black velvet, when the woman who had been known as Sister Judith looked out from a window of a train panting importantly into Felcote station. She still wore the closely-meshed veil, but from behind it her rapid glance swept the platform. It seemed clear of anything but uniformed figures. She stepped quietly out, her head bowed, and dropped her ticket at the collector's feet. When he straightened up, and looked, she was merely a nebulous figure moving swiftly down the road winding to the Manor House and the sea.

She drew in a half-quivering breath as the never-to-be-forgotten ocean and pinewood air fanned past her nostrils; but that was all. It might seem exceptionally dark, and appallingly still, after the boom and glare of London streets; but her supreme, slowly acquired contempt for feminine weaknesses had to-night attained its highest possible point. She moved along, cold, scornful, merciless—as Cleopatra of Egypt may have moved when Mark Antony turned from her proffered love. Only once she had to turn aside, hold her breath, and recollect that she had been different—a thing palpitating with passion and sick with the selfishness of man.

There was the whiz of rubber wheels and pant of petrol cylinders; two lamps stared and blazed like a wolf's eyes in the gloom behind her. She stood back still against the hedge. It was a Panhard car, gone by like a flash; but she had time to see the white, handsome, cynical face of

the man lying back with folded arms in the tonneau. It was her last glimpse on earth of Doctor Gilbert Lancing.

He was back here, then—perhaps had rushed back at night for a few feverish minutes to see his substitute, and was now careering back to Barrowdene station. It mattered nothing; he was an intangible figure in her mind to-night. It showed her her own strength—the fact that she could let him vanish by without cry or thrill—the fact that she could obliterate the memory of his kisses as easily as he had done hers. The sound died, and she went on.

Why had she deliberately come back into the danger zone? What was it she really had set herself to do? She could not have answered. Something, as she said, was drawing her on to look once more into the eyes of that other woman—that was all.

The road, of course, swept directly past the house gates. Mechanical force of habit—and inseparable tendency to stealth—suggested the short cut across the grounds that would bring her out to the gravel slope below the hall door. After the long spell of warm rain that path would be a mere sodden sponge beneath the feet; but she gave no thought to that—life for her was no longer composed of consecutive trifles. She turned through the wicket. She was very near now—very near now! If the house atmosphere had a scent of its own her nostrils could recognise it again now.

She could see the gabled roof rising hazily against the night. Spite of herself, there was a dull quickening of her pulse—she went a little faster. It was in her now to dare and achieve a

great unrehearsed denouement. She saw herself standing in the drawing-room, ringed by a dumb wonder. She would calmly dare them all, sneer smilingly, challenge them to put down concrete proofs of her share in the abstraction of Spartan Loder's documents. Documents buried under a stone slab in the maze pavilion—directions secreted behind a clock in the library—who in the outside world would believe the story for a moment! Nevertheless, the world should hear of it all.

She would demand to stand face to face with Sheba St John. Her boxes should be carried out and taken to the station by the servants. The cheque should be written—the cheque for her months of hired service to the man who now lay in Felcote cemetery. One minute later, before them all, the fragments of it should be lying at Sheba's feet. Then she would sweep out without a word. She could afford to keep on her mask of silence to-night. To-night was only the beginning of an end. As she had planned it in her mind, the curtain could not fail to fall upon the greatest of all human tragedies—the tragedy of a woman's broken heart.

The deadly joy of it—of the last intervening moment—was humming through her brain as wind hums through stretched wires. She had come to the path end; she had now only to cross the shrubbery. Yet she paused.

There was an uncertain sound behind—as if someone were moving up quickly on tiptoe. Yes—yes! She heard the squeak of boot leather in sodden grass. All the nerve control acquired in a lifetime oozed out in one instant. Realising nothing definite, she had to swerve convulsively round like a beast at bay. A wild cry, half anger,

choked up in her throat. A woman, after all, can be only a woman!

It never sounded. It was throttled back by a sweat-damp, nervous hand that suddenly clamped her throat just above the breast. She had no time to speak. Through the crimson fog of that suffocation her eyes focussed a man's face, evil, haggard, sickly. It was the man with whom she had made her calm compact in a London room. "Wait!" she had said, in her diabolical majesty. And he had waited—until now.

His straining whisper flicked foam into her face. He was shaking her rigid figure to and fro in his culminating fear and exultation. He had put out all his brute strength. His hands were swelling with the blood pumped up by that great issue at stake. A million! Men had sold their souls for a thousandth part of it. The grip of gold!

"Give them up—give them up!" he moaned, his clutch tightening. "They're mine—hand them over! Those deeds, or——"

She struggled. Life seemed ineffably sweet and wonderful in that moment, little as she would have believed it. She tore at the hot, great hand to gain her voice for one instant—to tell him something! She had all but succeeded; she thrust her fingers into his eyes; she was wresting back her head for the gasping cry.

With a whine of agony he swung her away at arm's length. She knew something heavier than flesh and bone was descending—she put up her gloved hands to ward it off. Too late. Heaven and earth seemed to come together and flatten as with the crash of two great cymbals. And she lay between—mute—still.

CHAPTER XXV

"MISS ST JOHN! Sheba!"

Three quiet words ; but with a suppressed regret, a note of pain and finality, which had not seemed to vibrate in that deep voice before.

"Sheba!"

It was just as the dusk came settling down. She had been sitting at the piano there, but only to strike a few hushed chords and then to withdraw her hands as if desecration had been done. All seemed strange—all life seemed to be in a state of listening suspension. Why? Why?

She had moved across to the glass doors, trying to watch with interest that marvellous glow of lilac and lemon over Felcote—listening to that noise as of muffled, spasmodic drum-beats from the heavy sea. But the clear, pansy-soft eyes saw nothing—an infinite sadness and longing dimmed them ; and her ears had been set for the sound of her name. She had known by woman's intuition that sooner or later he would come to her in that way ; yet, now that the moment was here, something in the depths of his voice checked the reply she had prepared so carefully. Instead, she half turned. Even if he did not understand, his man's quick eyes must see the working of her throat, as lump after lump rose there. Now her womanliness forced her to play a part. There was something that he ought to know, but which her own lips could never tell him.

Ought that thrilling cry from Spartan Loder's lips to be buried with Spartan Loder as something that had never been uttered?

The days were following each other in swift succession and formed a long chain now; but not as yet, try as she might, could she seem to grope entirely free of the dreamlike haze surrounding everything, and realise that life was life. That self-same hush of uncertainty still overhung the house. That burning question in Felcote as to what part Wilfred Spurr would play in the future, and as to the location of Spartan Loder's mysterious hoard, was still swinging in the scales.

For the greater part of that last week Spurr had been in London, but apparently nothing had resulted from the journey. And now at dusk, after remaining in his room for hours at a stretch, he had chosen his moment to come quietly down the stairs. Of a sudden his shadow had wavered past her. Did it—did it mean good-bye? She had grasped in some vague way that he was returning to Canada, for a time, at anyrate—solely in order that, she told herself, he could leave her in unchallenged possession of the Manor House. It could only be that!

"Miss St John!" He bent a little closer, as if to say that she must answer him. "In what way have I come short of your expectations? Why have you set yourself to avoid meeting me for the past day or two? You have done that! I know it; and I think you know it. If I have failed in much that I hoped to do for you before I left, I have deserved nothing so cruel as your forced silence. Nothing!"

Still she stood statue-like. He was drawing away. She heard the slight movement. He saw her set lips quiver anyhow, as she felt out for the deck-chair placed there. The man was all responsive fibres beneath an armour of muscle. In an instant he was stooping over her, his hand closed upon her shoulder, his low voice reaching her woman's heart.

"A barrier? Break it down! Sheba! Have they stabbed you into indifference? Don't you think I know? Have they reminded you that, in your position here, frigid reserve is the right robe to wear while I am here, now that the worst of the situation is over? God, this world! Well I know how the many tongues have been at work from the outset—and what a sensitive heart beats here under my hands! There, you shall not have to endure that added strain much longer. I simply came to speak in my own defence. As a man, I have tried my utmost to stand between a woman and the weight of fear that was like to crush her!"

"Yes—yes!" She found the word surging wildly in her throat, but still her face was a sealed book to him. The moment had come when she dared not look back into those thoughtful, fearless eyes—and he had divined why! Only yesterday it had reached her ears—that question of Carlotta Barrington's that had buzzed around Felcote: "Strange, is it not, if Miss St John hopes to keep house for the nephew as she kept it for the uncle?"

No; he did not know! If he had done he could not have withdrawn his hand in that sharp way. She made her supreme effort. The man had spoken; he had a right to a reply.

"Yes!" she repeated, with difficulty. "I know; I have seen and appreciated far more than you think. I—I can never hope to repay you; you do not wish it. You—you have sent to book your passage?"

"Not yet." He stood with arms crossed. She knew that his jaws were firmly set—but she must not appear to know! "That is only a detail. You and I need not speak of that. I, at anyrate, have something far deeper to face."

"What is that?" she whispered.

"What is it? You know! You know that all my search has ended in ghastly failure. I have faced it; I am going to realise once for all that my uncle has taken his secret with him, because nothing conceivably can be done now to prove otherwise. I shall leave the forlorn hope—the invisible thread—in Mr Crewe's hands. I may be gone some few weeks—even months."

"Months!" she said, half to herself. He had paused.

"Months! For that time—yes, for that time, at least, I have told myself that you will be able to remain here; because, but for you and Mrs Saxon, I fear the place would go to pieces. And, again," he went on quickly, as the unconscious tremor ran through her, "it must never be forgotten that, in the possible event of Mr Loder's dying wishes becoming known, Miss St John might be found to have a considerable interest in them. Speaking for myself alone, I cannot believe otherwise."

He stooped again, trying to force a smile, as he looked into her averted face. But no word came;

and that lip of hers quivered away in a manner to pain and puzzle any man. She had purposely avoided him. Was there anything that he was not to know? If so, Wilfred Spurr was not the man to press his right.

"No answer to-night, then!" he said cheerfully, drawing away. "What did I expect? You may have been forming arrangements of your own. I spoke of it because I am informed emphatically by Mrs Saxon that such is the only arrangement possible during my absence."

"You spoke of it for that reason only?" she asked quickly. And he bit his lip, and whitened a little.

"No; but because it was also my own deepest wish that you should remain here in that position—queen of the household that I leave behind! I did not know how to express it. Sheba, you knew!"

An eloquent silence. Tears—unbidden tears—were beginning to brim upon her eyelashes. There was a vague sense of "farewell" and finality breathing about her. Criminal almost it seemed, to keep her silence—knowing that one breath at this moment from her lips might keep him and change all his life plans in a flash. And yet—no, no; he must never know in life! A minute more, and she was speaking as quietly as himself. He was the real master here—and she his housekeeper for a few weeks. That was all!

"If you still wish it to be—yes!" She took out a tiny notebook and a pencil—the business-like mockery of it, when her heart was beating with a throb plain to his eyes even in the dusk! "You have concluded all arrangements here, then?"

"All?" He had to laugh, although his voice was unsteady. "Well, in truth, I have made none. Everything shall stand as it stood—as it stood before my sinister advent."

"Don't! don't!" came, with a little gasping sob. And he was protectively grave at once.

"I won't! Forgive that! Let us look at it together, before I go. There being no will, so far as we can ascertain, the money and property, whatever and wherever it may be, reverts formally to the next-of-kin; and——"

"To you!" she put in pantingly. "To you, in any case! To you!"

"Ah, but wait, little one!" He was eager in turn; he did not know what he had said. "I shall need to prove that I am that man. Heaven alone knows what that might mean before the courts are satisfied. This is England; and I am technically domiciled in Canada. So far as I am aware, not a single document exists abroad there to show that Mr Loder was my mother's brother. I may be wronging her, but I fancy—I fear—that she had destroyed everything that could remind her of that brother's existence on the same earth. The proof might be a work of a lifetime, and would assuredly cost more money than I possess at present. There might even be some surviving relation of whom we do not dream. Now—" he drew in his breath—"if a will had come to hand it would flood the whole darkness with light. Merely supposing that my name appeared as heir or co-heir: Mr Crewe tells me that I could take over the property as a matter of course. As it is I can simply lodge a formal claim, and leave

myself to be slowly absorbed by the Crown lawyers. No—no, I shall let it go! Let it go!” he repeated, as her gasp came again. “If only there were a signed paper all would be different! There is not one! Even if papers have been stolen, as we believe, a will could hardly have been the thieves’ magnet; it could be of no earthly use to anyone but the persons named in it. Perhaps, indeed, Uncle Loder meant to tell me the facts by word of mouth before he died, but now——”

It broke off. The still, listening girl had swayed up suddenly, and faced him. Out of a death-white face her eyes shone with a light he had never seen in them yet. Her voice came with a steady, level calmness that he was never to forget.

“Hush! I am going to speak. I respect you; I owe you the truth, as a woman you respect.” The slightest pause. She put out her hand and touched his arm. “Think what you will of me for keeping it back until now, because I can never explain. There *is* a will—a will that explains all. And I knew it!”

“You!” He stood quite still, looking down into the windows of her woman’s soul. “You!” he whispered again. “You would never lie to me. Where, and what, is it?” And her hand went slowly back.

“I cannot tell you. But it is written—it exists—it would tell all!”

“Miss St John!” He had looked all around the shadowy great room. A dulness had crept into his warm voice. He was drawing back from the mixed thrill of that partial revelation. “You knew

this—and kept such a silence! What does it mean?” He reached out and grasped her wrist. “No; I cannot believe it. One night, in this very room, you assured me in the same voice that you had no knowledge of such a paper. And now——”

She drew free—drew up her slight figure as if struck. “God help me!” he heard her whisper. Then she had faced him again. There was a dilation of her eyes, a quick rise and fall of her breast, that warned him.

“And I had not! You dare to doubt me? I gave you the truth, as far as I knew it then. I knew nothing of it until—until yesterday. You shall trust me in that—or you may go, disbelieving me utterly. If I have kept a shameful silence these two days, you must not ask me why—and you must never ask me to say another word upon it!”

A minute more ticked by before the man found himself able to sound his voice.

“Miss St John, forgive me! Trust you? What a word to-night! Ay, with my life itself! No; I will ask no more—except this one thing. You heard of this—how—from whom? You can answer that.”

“From Mrs Saxon.” She had drawn quite back into the shadow of the window draperies, and stood as in shame, her face hidden, her hands strained together. “I should have told you at once, I know, but I could not. I am a woman!”

Yes! And Spurr came slowly forward to grip the clasped hands in spite of her, his voice pleadingly passionate.

“What! You fear my thoughts—my being a

man! Then you do not know me in the least. Such a silence as that was cruelty!—a slight upon me! Shall I speak? I understand all! In that will he has left his money to *you*. And you feared to let me know—feared that I might turn against you as an adventuress here! . . . Miss St John—Sheba—it will not be the mere loss of money that sends me away a miserable man. It will be the thought that I had failed so utterly to make myself understood. Oh, God, if you had never told me that!”

His strong figure shook. For a moment they stood together in the faded light, his drawn face drooped almost to hers. His pain was real, and she knew it. There was something that she could have said, but it must not come from her lips yet—not yet. He had given her no right yet.

“Speak!” he broke out huskily, almost fiercely. “I care nothing. Whatever it is, let me know—let me go in peace. I honour you in any case; I know you to be the woman you are! Sheba, speak—speak now!”

She unwound his tenacious hands, moved across steadily to the fireplace, rang the housekeeper’s bell, and stood waiting—perfectly tranquil, as it looked. What was to happen? Wilfred Spurr stood watching her in a spell of wonder. And then he knew that the door was open. Mrs Saxon was peering round.

“Why, Miss Sheba! I hardly saw you. You want the lights?”

“Not yet! . . . Mrs Saxon, I ought to have asked you yesterday if—if Mr Carnforth would know anything of the terms in that will of which

you spoke. The rector was named as one of the executors, you thought?"

"Let me think!" breathed the other woman. "No—no—I fancy he was not to know a syllable of what it said until it was wanted at death. Besides, dearie, *he* would never have opened his lips to anyone, you may be sure! If he has done, he's not worthy to stand in that pulpit every Sunday!"

"No—no!" came across, without a tremor. "It was not that I meant. And Doctor Lancing, the other executor——"

A light flashed through Wilfred Spurr's mind. Heavens, yes! He recalled those sneering words of Gilbert Lancing's on a never-forgotten day that seemed ages away. A will! Had it any connection with the revelation of this moment? But there was no time to hold his head and think for himself. Mrs Saxon had whispered back with withering emphasis:

"Ah, that's altogether different!—we'll let that pass! Dearie, as I stand here, I feel utterly certain that Mr Loder told them nothing save that he had written their names as gentlemen who had known him in life. Another thing, dear—haven't you heard? Felcote is hardly likely to hear of it through him now. Sophie brought the news to-night from his maid. He is off to Monaco for three months—came back for his cheque-book this evening. The Barringtons are there; perhaps that explains it; Carlotta might come back with another name!" Then she seemed to realise something deeper breathing in the room's atmosphere. She closed the door and stole uncertainly

forward. "Why, dearie? Why do you look at me like that? You're not afraid of it reaching Mr Spurr's ears before you could make up your mind to——"

"Hush! Mr Spurr is here—in this room!"

And a smothered cry escaped Mrs Saxon. She had not seen that man's motionless figure in the deepening obscurity. She turned tremblingly.

"God forgive me! Miss Sheba—Mr Spurr—I never dreamed that——"

"We know that," he put in very quietly. "It cannot matter now. No; I am not angry—only that I feel like a man slowly climbing out of a pit of darkness. Let Miss St John speak. Listen!"

And that low, level voice went through the silence, as he craned forward in a mental agony of suspense.

"You hear? I want you, I bid you, to tell Mr Spurr just what you told me yesterday morning. There is no other way. He does not understand silence—would prefer to know all. Forget me! It is his human right to know. Yes; the will!"

"And why," he added, shakily, "You have not spoken of it to me or to anyone else until now, knowing it to have been the pivot on which, perhaps, my whole life to come might turn!"

CHAPTER XXVI

WHOLE minutes, it seemed, had passed before Mrs Saxon could trust herself to obey. Through her hushed tones trembled a suggestion of defiance and desperation.

"You will remember, sir, throughout that life that you forced my lips. Why have I not spoken of it until now? Because, Mr Spurr, when I have once taken an oath before heaven I respect it."

"An oath?"

"Ay! I call it that; although, being a woman, I may have given it the wrong name. I could not speak because, till death released me, I have lived under a seal of silence that all the money in the world should not make me break; and because, when that seal was taken away, I found myself placed in such a position that—— But it is too late to talk of that now. You are a man, sir—and Miss Sheba is a woman! I could have told you what I knew. It has been burning on my lips from hour to hour; but a woman's heart was bound up with it. There was something—something that I was praying Almighty would not come as a blow if I held it back until the last moment!"

"Go on—go on!" Spurr said, his hands straining. His feet still seemed slipping on the brink of that pit of darkness.

"No—no!" The weak little moan came from

Sheba's throat. Her great effort was dying. As if she could bear no more, she was moving across toward the door. Just in time, as by some intuition, Spurr realised and sprang. She found her cold fingers drawn within his, and held tightly. He did not divine the truth—not yet! Another minute, and he might be loathing her, turning from her, as the creature who stood between him and his inheritance—a living halter about his neck for ever!

“Go on!” he repeated, almost sternly. “I demand to know, whatever it is. You have said so much that you must say all. Let us face it—now!”

“You shall, sir.” Mrs Saxon took a step, determined as himself, her eyes piercing the gloom. “But I’m going to say first of all, as I may never have the chance again, that many a gentleman living to-night would be happy to hear what you must hear. God bless us all!”—the sob was bound to come. “It has haunted me many a day—many a long night—to think that the man named in that will might turn out to be a villain—as they say so many missing nephews are! Yes, sir, there is a will; and I witnessed it—I and Clarkson!”

“Clarkson?”

“Clarkson!—the footman who left us some months ago, leaving me all the weight of the secret to bear alone.”

“You know his whereabouts now?” Spurr whispered, still forcing his great calm, as with premonition. All the while those cold fingers were struggling convulsively to escape him, and in vain.

"I hold his promise to come forward if ever wanted; and I trust him. Here it is, sir! One night, Mr Loder, always so strange, rang the library bell. I found him sitting there, very grey and grim. 'Bring Clarkson,' he said. He locked the door, put up the black screen around the desk, looked at us both a long time, and read out a long paper. I think—I think he had seen some vision in his sleep, and realised that he must go the way all men before him had gone. All that the paper said, no woman could hope to remember. And I was numbed from head to foot by his manner; I doubt if I should recognise my own signature there to-day. But we signed it as he commanded, and we stepped back out of the screen only when we had repeated some words. It was a promise, under heaven, never to breath a syllable of it until after he should be dead and out of sight."

"You witnessed his signature. That was enough. What—what made him read out the paper's contents in that way?"

"I could never tell, sir—unless some second sight gave him a glimpse of this moment. You must take my word for all of it, Mr Spurr! If you held me to ransom, I could never tell what became of the paper—had never another sight of it!"

"Go on! There was money?" Spurr said. The outline of his sombre face was all but hidden now. Sheba's slight figure had become as still as in a trance.

"Money?" Mrs Saxon reached out her hands to him. "I can only tell you what I heard from his own lips. He may have lost his hold on sanity for a moment, but I have not. Money?"

There seemed no end to it! If it's all true, sir, you stand there one of the richest men in England to-night! There were thousands and thousands in Government stocks, money banked abroad, this freehold property, and—and some great silver mine out West, at the bottom of which, as far as Clarkson and I could make out, he had buried a dozen fortunes in one. I don't attempt to follow the figures—I simply say, Mr Spurr, that every stick and stone was left to you, his nephew . . . I will say it, Miss Sheba—I must! . . . left to you, on the one solemn condition that you took to wife the precious one you are holding now—his own treasure—Miss Sheba!”

“Sheba!” That one hollow, gasping word, that seemed wrung out from his very soul; and no more.

“Ay!” Her indignant voice was strangled by sobs. In that moment she seemed to forget all save that she was a woman herself—all save the shame and horror of another woman sacrificed on the altar of Spartan Loder's great irony. She had plucked his rigid hands away—she had drawn Sheba close to her own breast. She turned upon him in the darkness, in hushed challenge.

“And you could ask why I did not come and repeat such words calmly to your face the moment you set foot here! No! Right or wrong, unless she had bidden me, I would have kept the silence until my own last hour. Dared I speak of it, as a woman, until I could bring myself to tell Miss Sheba herself what a sword had hung over her! *Now* you know why she could not answer you, and all that it has meant for both of us! What would the world out there say? Ay, you know! It

would shout as in one voice that she had played her cards here as only a great actress could play them. Ay, you see now! It meant that in the same breath she must appear to say: 'I have you in my power. Either you marry me, or give up the money!' Could any woman say it? Pardon me to-night, sir, but—but I had been thinking you one of the rare gentlemen who can understand without being told!"

And then the long, strange spell of silence—moments lost from their lives. They could not see his face now; they were not even to know whether he was passing through the sweat and agony of a struggle—an ordeal such as few men are called upon to face: or whether some other woman's heart might not be balancing in the scales against his honour. They could only hear a sound as if knot after knot were forming in his throat and stifling the words that strove to pass. And then at last, as Mrs Saxon went to move, his voice reached them—subdued, different.

"Stand still—not yet! We know. And now—what must be done? Mrs Saxon!"

"Done? I suppose—I presume, sir," she answered, in a cool, steadied voice, "you must bear the blow, make up your mind at once to lose the money, and let it go to the deserving poor—his alternative! Only—only this, sir! I scarcely think I was quite the one to be asked to answer that question!"

And he drew in that long, deep breath. His strong, still figure seemed to quiver.

"No; you are right," he whispered. "It is not for you to decide—nor for me!"

He turned away, and waited. That moment!—that moment in which the muffled drums of Fate seemed beating loudly—coming nearer—nearer! He had heard no rustle, no whispering, no closing of a door; yet it seemed to him that he was quite alone now. To cry out—to call her back—to ask her to believe that love's light had already flooded his lonely horizon before money was mentioned—no, he could not. Her silence was enough. She had been thrust upon him—was given to him as a bridal gift! She must turn from him in the cold dignity of a woman who could never give unasked. It was a moment too late—a moment too late to speak!

He stood; stood like one awaiting the sentence of a judge across a hushed court—the marching of many feet—the burst of light in some shadowy old cathedral. Waiting only for some incredible spell around him to break!

And then—then something happened that seemed to deepen it all. His arm was touched. He took the hand from his eyes. There—there beside him, her pale face dim in that light, her eyes filmed and far away, stood the one dear figure. It did not seem real—not yet. He found himself speaking in a low, awed tone, as if fearing to disturb the workings of a divine process.

“You could not speak—no! I honour you the more for that silence.”

No answer. He found her hands, and held them, and went on softly:

“But *my* voice is not sealed. I will dare to ask you the question once—now! . . . Could you realise? Think!—not of his money, not of

Wilfred Spurr, but of your own heart and its secret. Will it—could it ever make me the happy man I have longed to be, almost from that moment when I first knew that Sheba lived ? ”

No answer. Not yet—not yet! Only the faint echo of a sob in her throat, as his face drooped to hers.

“Sheba!” He spoke the word as if its sound were almost sacred for him. “Sheba, hear me! The will is forgotten—is not between us at this moment. I have always believed this: there is one true mate for every man in our world; and thrice blessed the man who finds that mate before the tale of his lonely life is told! Shall that happiness be mine? I would not have dared to speak—not yet, at least; but Fate has called to you for me, through my dead uncle’s last wish. That, maybe, was all he waited to tell me! Yes; I could lose the money, with scarcely a pang of regret; but, while God gives me breath to say it, I won’t lose my hope of you! If you cannot bring yourself to answer here and now, at least let me go with that living hope. . . . Sheba—beloved!”

And—yes, she was a woman, as she had said, with a woman’s full heart. For a moment longer she stood, half turned from him, her eyes closed, fighting the last bit of her fight. And then—then her face was slowly turned up to him. She was caught and locked within the strong arms that had waited and hungered so long.

No need to speak; silence was more eloquent than all. She had found her rock of refuge in the dark hour; her heart had gone out to its mate; old Spartan Loder’s dying desire was more than fulfilled.

“My own Sheba! To be my own for ever and ever!” Spurr’s whisper came through the gloom, as his hand smoothed back the wave of brown hair from the pale forehead, and his lips reverently touched the closed eyelids. “My life’s sweet work, to guard the love that came to me to-night! My Sheba—my wife! Now—now let the world say what it will. And let me answer at the altar in Felcote church!”

CHAPTER XXVII

THAT same evening ; but past nine o'clock now.

There were vague stirrings and movements in the big house, as if it were coming back to life after a long period of torpor. Wilfred Spurr was writing a sheaf of letters and telegrams. A visibly new man, with a fresh and splendid impetus to his future career, he had had a long, whispered consultation with the housekeeper in her own room. He unfolded a wonderful prospect. Mrs Saxon had cried a little, laughed a little, wrung his proffered hand, and now was panting up the staircase to push open the door of Sheba's room.

"Joy—joy! It's like new life—there's music ringing everywhere in my ears! Bless you both!—let me be first to say it's the proudest hour ever known in this house! Oh, to speak out, after all that terrible blank of silence, and the watching to see what Mr Spurr might be thinking of you! What will all Felcote say now?—and the Barrington girls! Oh, to see their faces, if they knew! The place will be in a fever. Dearie, no more of those wistful looks now! He's a dear fellow—although, of course, you can hardly expect to find it out just yet!"

"Is—is he downstairs now?" Sheba asked, very quietly. She had some sort of proud right over his movements now—she had been taken to the arms that would shelter her for life! She had been

standing by her open window, looking steadfastly out across the park to Barrowdene lights.

"No ; he has gone riding across to Barrowdene with his telegrams—one to the lawyer, one to America, and one to the London police. Felcote office closed at eight, you know. That will must and shall be found, he says. You see it all, dearie ? He means to look at it with his own eyes, even if the house has to come down brick by brick. He'll never rest now, even if the police have to search every house in Brixton ! I think—I *know*—he means the world to see that will, so that no one shall be able to say we had concocted the romantic story to trap him ! My dear, he means you to be a great lady, and keep open house ; everything is to be changed, to blot out memories. I care nothing now even if the whole mystery of that night is never to lift ! You're trembling still, dearie—and no wonder. He wrung *my* hand as if he would crush it ; men never realise their own strength. And—and I keep thinking about Sister Judith. Not a sign from her—and her boxes still lying up in that room ! I spoke to him of it, and the strangest look came into his eyes. He says the boxes are not to be touched on any account. Not that there is a trace of any papers in them ; I have searched them thoroughly. If she took anything incriminating, as he still believes, it was in that sealskin bag. An uncanny woman, although something—— Oh, I forgot ! Dearie, you'll dress to-night to fit the occasion. He says I am to be sure and lay a nice supper in the dining-room, however late it may be, and another specially for the servants. It's evident we have a *man* to deal with ; he is not

going to hide his happiness under any bushel ! Now, take my advice and lie down, and forget everything for half-an-hour. All will seem so calm and different in the morning ! ”

“ I could not,” Sheba said in the same quiet voice. “ I remember now — I came up for a wrapper. I was going to walk up and down the drive for a while. Chill ? No ; the air is warm and beautiful after the rain. It will do me more good than anything else. Please ! ”

And Mrs Saxon’s arm dropped.

“ As you will, Miss Sheba ! But—but I wouldn’t go too far from the house while he is away—even now ! ”

Sheba moved slowly down and across the drawing-room, stepped on to the balcony, and drew in a long, quivering draught of the sweet night air—that somehow seemed to waft from a new world. Her oval face looking out from the wrap folds, she stole down to the gravel sweep. Outwardly she was something more than calm, but the heart within still throbbed with those perilous, slow beats. She had not wanted to talk, even if able. She wanted to shut out the world and be quite alone, to commune with the man in spirit, to gather unto herself the composure and dignity which he would expect from her.

How—how had it all happened ? In one hour alone in the world—in the next, a promised wife ! “ His heart’s mate ! ”—he had known it from the first, he said. He had taken her to his breast, and kissed her eyes and lips. Yes ; he had meant those words. He had not been swept out of himself by mere contemptible dread of losing his inheritance.

That was what she wished to realise in this interval. If she could not she must flee from the place, from contact with him, to-night—now!

She walked to and fro, scarcely seeing the path ahead. And now she had paused, by the shrubbery; and now her thoughts came back with a sick rush to the world around, and the thick beats of her heart seemed to come to a sudden cessation. Oh God!—Oh God! what was *that*?

A low, terrible series of moans. A moaning that seemed to have gone on through eternity—a pitiful suggestion of sound at the threshold of death that congealed the life in her body. She could not cry out—could not think. Foot by foot, quite unconscious of movement, she crept along the shrubbery path, parting the overgrowth as she went, the rank spittle of the shrubs adhering to her wrap. And there at last she was, staring down at a still shape that lay across the sodden foot track. A woman, with life still left in her, lying here!

Dumb with awe, quivering with vague pity that overwhelmed every other thought, she knelt, softly drew away the wisps of torn veil from a deathlike face—and shuddered away again. Sister Judith Cottrell!

Sister Judith Cottrell! A great bass bell seemed to thunder the name into space; elfin bells took up the sound and brought it back in echoes. Sister Judith, the unfathomable, the woman who had walked the maze, stricken down—dying—here, within a hundred yards of the house!

The shock was its own antidote. She was down upon her knees again, all that was noble and

protective in her surging uppermost. She wound her arms beneath the heavy head ; it was pillowed now against her own breast. One more stare down into the death-like face, and then her cry rang across to the house, again and again :

“ Help me ! Here — here ! Mrs Saxon ! — Sophie ! . . . Hush — see for yourselves ! Sister Judith — yes ; lying here — lying near unto death. Help me ; lift her gently, if you can ; carry her straight in. Her face ! — her poor, beaten face ! No, no, not to her own old room — that is stripped and cold ; no, to mine ! ”

And in awed silence the still figure was lifted in and dropped softly upon Sheba's bed. Strange it might be, but Sheba found herself calmest of them all at this moment, now that the first shock had died. She issued her directions in a steady, compelling whisper, with a new sense of responsibility and a fixed belief of Fate's handiwork in this last happening of all :

“ Bring brandy ! The brandy, warm water, and lint. And you, Parkins, run to Felcote for the doctor as if you ran for my own life, and keep your silence. Close the doors, please ; there is no need for confusion now. Mrs Saxon, you stay to help me ; let everything else go, for the moment. So white — so still ! Is it — is it to end in death ? ”

“ Miss Sheba ! Not that awful word to-night ! Oh, to think it should come to pass now — for her to come back to us, like a ghost from that past ! . . . No, her heart just beats. You may have saved her — maybe by minutes, if we knew ! ”

They three were alone. They stooped over her. It was Sheba's own fingers that touched

the convulsively closed lips with brandy, and tenderly sponged away some stain from the marble-like brows. And at last, when all their efforts had seemed to come too late, a magnetic tremble ran down the rigid figure. Bending lower yet, clasping the icy fingers in hers, Sheba spoke softly :

"Heaven's mercy! Sister Judith! You know me again? You can speak?"

An uncertain spell of watching and listening. It was just as the doctor's carriage wheels rattled over the drive, as they stood back in readiness, that the heavy eyelids slowly lifted like curtains, and the eyes beneath fixed their blank stare upon Sheba. The arms reached out; the brain seemed to right itself; a cry, ringing with the torture of baffled passion, strained from her lips.

"Take her away—blind her eyes—that woman! Curse her!—curse her for all time, here and hereafter! She shall never marry her Spurr! *You!* You took from me the one man I ever loved—the one man who had ever thought me worth loving. Gilbert—Gilbert! Are you there—can you hear? Gilbert Lancing! Come to me—stand by me! Tell me you never asked her to be yours; tell me you hate her, as I hate! Devils—devils!"

Blanched to the lips, blasted as by a hot wind that had swept by, Sheba and Mrs Saxon stood hand in hand. There was no need of a word, even if either could have voiced it. To one woman, at least, swift illumination had come in that instant. Now she knew!

There were just those few seconds for her mind

to rise to the occasion. This doctor from Felcote, substitute for the very man whose name had been moaned out, was even now at the staircase head. He would hear the woman's self-betrayed life secret. The news would be flashed in turn to Gilbert Lancing—all Felcote might know within a few hours. Just in time she sprang across to the door. Sophie stood breathless there—she had sped on ahead to announce him.

"Sophie, quick! Send the doctor back! Back! Tell him there has been a mistake—he is not wanted—I will write to him to-morrow and explain. Obey me!"

And she closed and held the door, praying audibly that that self-condemning scream might not sound again, in time to reach his ears. And the spell of silence mercifully held; and the doctor strode back to his carriage—never to know. As Mrs Saxon drew that sobbing breath of relief Sheba looked out once more.

"Now! Tell Parkins to drive his fastest into Barrowdene and bring back old Doctor Wilmot. To-night, at any cost, he must come. And let it be understood that I hold you all responsible for any breath outside of what has happened. I trust you all!"

"You are not—you cannot be thinking to remain in this room!" Mrs Saxon gasped, as the hurried footsteps died. "Impossible! That was no delirium, but one flash of living truth. I cannot allow it—he will not allow it. She might—she might even go so far as to——"

Sheba turned back her pallid, determined face. She had taken her place by the bedside, and

clasped one of those groping hands resolutely again.

“Please God, I must, and will! You heard? It is me she hates. I came between them. If she is to live she shall know. No one else must be here to hear those words from her lips again. No ; she has suffered, as only a woman can suffer. You heard—she loved him !”

CHAPTER XXVIII

AND so the minutes went by. And Sheba stayed beside the moaning, writhing figure, whispering soothingly, prepared to face that mad, accusing stare again without flinching from duty. And, just as it was to be, Mrs Saxon had stolen out to make the ice bandage and beef tea with her own careful hands, when that second searing, incoherent cry thrilled along the quiet corridor.

"Vile! To attempt my life—a man's hand against a woman! He followed me here, to kill me, to get the papers. That was the man I had bought with a price to help me! But I know him now! His card in my pocket—this pocket! He shall pay—pay for all—when I have been revenged on *her*. Not till then—no! I'll—I'll forgive him till then; I have him in my power surely now. Ah! At this moment you would give half you hope for to have kept faith with Sister Judith. That's me!"

It died down. The hands shook and worked as at the throat of some intangible foe bending above her; to and fro her sweat-damp face rocked upon the pillows as in suffocation. Then she became still. She was speaking in a cunning, stealthy voice to the wall there.

"Hear me? I was prepared for him. I had the will and the deeds—yes, but not in that packet! I did think my secret safe while I held *them*; I for-

got how vile he was! But they're still hidden—still hidden! He shall do my work—he shall come to me on his knees for the price—and he shall never see or handle the deeds of his silver mine. No one shall have them now—no one! And that ends it all. You hear me?”

“Hush—oh, hush, for all our sakes!”

“You hear me?” it rose again. “Spartan Loder’s great scheme has gone down to the grave with him. And the man who has waited and wasted so many precious years to steal it—the man who would sell his soul for those papers, as his father did before him—shall die, too, a cheated pauper! I know him: I can trace him; men of that stamp never fly far! He thinks he has killed me, and all is safe; but I know him—I shall breathe at his shoulder again—Manisty, Nineteen, Ardilaun Street, Brixton! He may call himself Swift again—may try to flee the country; but one advertisement of mine will bring him back to do my work—to play his great part as Wilfred Spurr again! How—how I loathe them all! Heavens, the irony of it shall come home to them! Wilfred Spurr! I thought I had won him from her. I drew him to my room; I held his hands, and I told him—ha, ha!—I told him that I was the woman Spartan Loder meant him to marry! And he believed it; he feared me; he scorned me—but he feared. And she shall know yet what it means to be a woman thrust back—in favour of a woman more beautiful! The price of another woman’s heart is a high one, but she shall pay it in full!”

So the sinister, concentrated gasps rose and fell. Shuddering, shrinking, Sheba listened bravely to

every word. As they died down again to delirious whisperings she rose, held her breath in an agony of hesitation, and then wrote down on a slip of paper that address at Brixton. Before she forgot! It was written, together with as many of the accompanying words as she could recall at such a moment. Beneath all, she penned a hasty little message of her own. She had finished, as Mrs Saxon rustled hurriedly in again.

"Doctor Wilmot is here—already!"

"Thank you!" Sheba said steadily. Her fear had gone now. Something was telling her that so it had been ordained this night—that now she was face to face with the real crisis in all this dark suspense. "Show him up at once, please! And then I trust you, and you alone, with this note for Mr Spurr. Hand it to him the moment he returns. Tell him that the Barrowdene office does not close until eleven o'clock—that a message can be got through even later, if necessary. He will understand. Tell him—yes, tell him to act upon this note just as he thinks right!"

Past midnight now. Doctor Wilmot had driven away long since; the silence of one more night had settled down over Felcote.

No; she was not to die so tragically as that, he had said, in his brusque, decisive fashion. The blow, a fierce one dealt with some loaded thong-butt, had left behind just the danger of brained fever; but the dawn would decide that doubt. If that development could be kept at bay, if those ice bandages were held incessantly to the burning head for a few hours longer, the morning should

find Judith Cottrell able to move and think. One week's perfect rest would do all that was then required. And he looked at Sheba, and knew that there was no need to say more.

And so the fateful hours ticked by, relieved only by a dream-like moment when Wilfred Spurr himself stole along the corridor and tapped softly at that door. It opened. Her arms went up around his neck and hung there for a while in silence. He was all in all to her now, and he was to know it.

"Yes!" he whispered, his eyes looking away. "It is true, although I should never have spoken of it in her lifetime. I can see now that she knew of the will and its terms from the beginning—that she stole it away with a double motive. She hoped—she had a desperate hope of becoming mistress here. Not from any motive of passion, but to be revenged upon you—upon my Sheba! I believed not a word of it then—I tried to put it out of my mind for ever; but she had represented herself to me as the woman Mr Loder wished me to marry. Forget it!—forget it, dearest, as I have done!" His voice broke. He drew the unresisting, slight figure closer and closer to him. "God bless my brave little girl! I understand now all that it means. All will come right. I shall be with you every moment in thought. I only await the morning. My Sheba waits with me!"

He had been in time to send his later telegrams flashing over the wires to London. By now the machinery of the law was in motion; the one fear remaining was that the man Manisty might have fled the country in a spasm of dread. No possible reply could reach Felcote for hours yet; but he

could wait calmly, with that new happiness in his heart. Whatever happened, Sheba had come to him—his own for ever! The money could go!

And, hour by hour, in the room far above, Sheba hung over that bed, determined that that blasting hate should be stamped out—determined to comfort and win the trust of the woman who had wished her dead!

Thrice the great hall clock had chimed, and the library timepiece had answered it. Three o'clock! And Sister Judith's pitiful murmurs had died away; the last wild sobbing fit was silenced; she seemed to have drifted into the lethargy of exhaustion. Thank heaven! it was the surest sign that one dreaded development might be held at bay.

Thrice, at least, Mrs Saxon had crept in and implored to be allowed to take a spell at watching; but Sheba was unnervingly resolute. It was her sole place, she answered. Through her, though all unconsciously, a woman's life had been brought to the brink of eternal destruction.

And now, overawed in spite of her courage by the great stillness while the scales swung, she was down upon her knees, breathing the words of a woman who believes in Answer.

"Oh, speak to her in her trouble! Spare her life!—and spare her the agony of a future without light and hope! Tell her the truth which, from my lips, she may never believe; tell her that, while those words remain unrecalled, I could never know happiness again! What can I do to make her believe me? How shall she rise on the

stepping-stones of her dead self? I never knew—I never knew!”

As the last breath died, as she unclosed her eyes, she saw a strange sight. The words had been heard! Silently Judith Cottrell had swayed up in the bed; weakly her fingers felt out; slowly a different light seemed struggling through that blank stare.

“She never knew. Never knew!” came the vague whisper of awe unspeakable. The groping hand went back, to be laid against her own forehead, where the ghastly pain had throbbed. She felt the bandage there. She stared at the kneeling figure of that other woman, and around the familiar, yet unfamiliar, room. “What is it—where am I?” her lips seemed to move.

“It is my room—at the Manor House. You know?” Sheba answered back, just as softly, afraid the wonderful illusion must break.

“*Your* room? Yours? No!”

“Ay! You remember a little now? Not so very long ago, when I lay ill, you sat beside me for hours one night. Now it is my turn! I brought you here. Don’t turn away yet! You were lying out there, so ill—so near death, it seemed! You hated me then—you thought you did; but I could not leave you. Oh, if I could but call back to life the past few months, to prove to you by something deeper than words that I——”

She could not finish. She had risen, her arms put out hesitatingly. But the deathly, rigid face was drawn back.

“You brought me here—you!” It came again—the incredulously sunken gasp of amazement

beyond all telling. "You sat beside me, and prayed—prayed for my life! . . . Do you *know*? I came—I came to kill you; to break your heart, crush you! . . . No, no; don't touch me. Not that—not yet! Stand away—let me speak. Go at once! Down to the room at the back of the lodge—by the gates there—a gap in the window glass! In there; you'll find the tin box—his will and the deeds! I flung them in the corner there, when I fled from the house that night. I feared pursuit—I knew I could always come back. I had stolen them: taken the plan of the maze, and stolen them from *his* hiding-place. I meant to keep them from you, for ever. Go! Let the world know—let the world know all! Too late—too late! My life is done! Yours begins—to-night! Take your heritage. Go!"

"Hush, hush! Not yet!" Her own heart beating as it might never beat again, Sheba was creeping closer and closer for the supreme moment which must come now or come never. And at last—at last the writhing, fighting figure ceased its resistance, and was still.

"Be brave!" Sheba had cried. "I know it all. If there was a price to pay you have paid it in full; and the world need never know. Only one woman has heard the words from your lips to-night—only one! Think! There is life to be lived—and, oh! how true it proves that our poor lives are really what we make them! Think!—happiness comes only from within! You do not—you could not—hate me. Tell me just that!"

For the last time she stared, shrank, struck out; and then, with a wild cry, she had snatched Sheba's

face in both shaking hands, and drawn it down—down to her own burning lips, in the kiss that atoned for all.

Half-past eight now!

A golden morning sun, flushing the land with rich promise, was throwing lances of amber through the wide flung balcony windows, as a telegraph messenger came hurrying up the drive. Wilfred Spurr, counting the minutes, had watched. Another instant, and the buff envelope was torn away.

“The man Manisty shot himself in his rooms at midnight. Before death had signed full confession. Officers on way with all particulars. Chief Commissioner, Scotland Yard.”

That was it—that was all. He set his lips, drew in one deep breath, and crushed the paper in his palm.

The door had opened. Very pale, but with a soft light shining in her eyes, the morning robe clinging about her slight figure, Sheba stood there.

“You have your news?” she whispered, as he sprang a step.

“Ay! The light is dawning—dawning! I am very happy. And you?”

As he held out his arms she put them back, softly wound her own around his neck, and looked up with the smile that lifts a woman to the level of the angels.

“Sheba need not speak! She loves you—loves you!”

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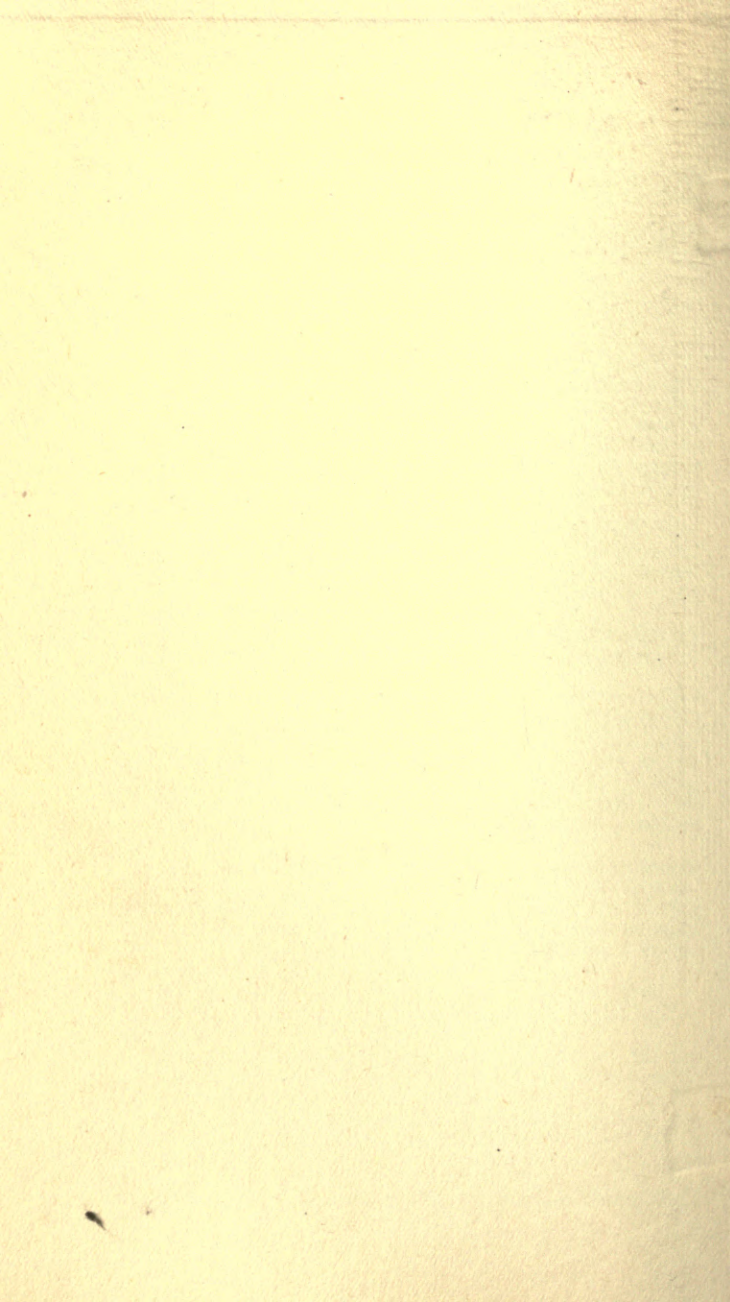
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